25th Year of Publication

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Fantasy AND Science Fiction

ISAAC ASIMOV

As Easy As Two Plus Three

JULY

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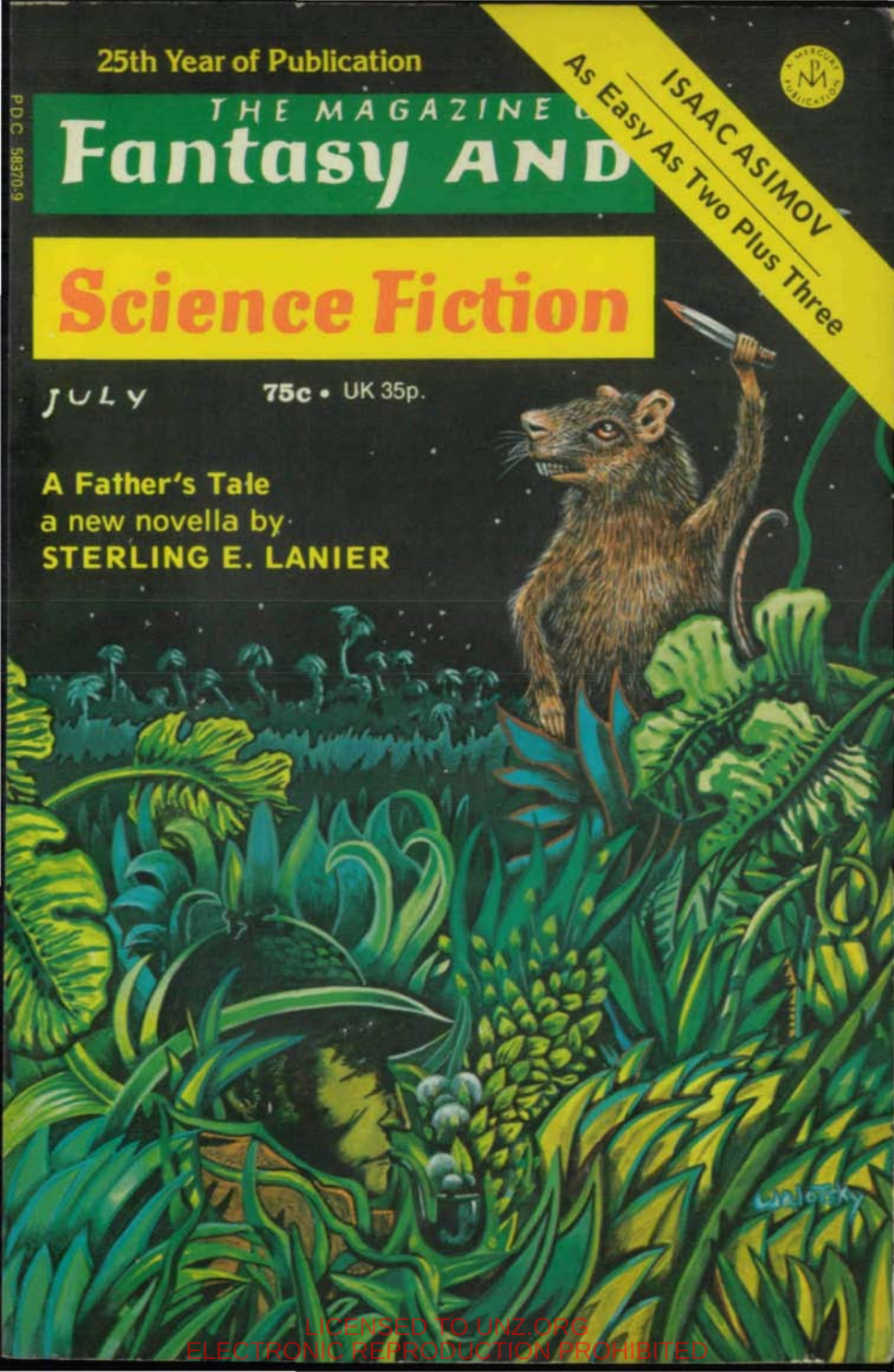
A Father's Tale
a new novella by
STERLING E. LANIER



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Fantasy and Science Fiction

Including Venture Science Fiction
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This, the longest and most unusual of Brigadier Donald Ffellowes' stories — or "tales" as Mason Williams would have it — concerns Ffellowes' father and a mysterious stranger who become uneasy allies on a grisly mission in the jungles of Sumatra. Friends of the Brigadier are almost certainly prepared for a tale of these astounding proportions; as for the rest of the world, we do not know ...

A Father's Tale

by STERLING E. LANIER

"You certainly seem to like the tropics, sir," said a younger member. It was one of the dull summer evenings in the club. The outside fetor in New York City was unbelievable. Heat, accumulated off the sidewalks, hung in the air. Manhattan was hardly a Summer Holiday, despite the claims of its mayor. It was simply New York, The City, a place one had to work in or probably die in.

"I suppose you have a point there," Ffellowes answered. The library was air-conditioned, but all of us who recently had come in from the streets were sweating, with one exception. Our British member was utterly cool, though he had come in after most of us.

"Heat," said Ffellowes, as he took a sip of his Scotch, "is, after all, relative, expecially in case. Rela*tives*, I should say.

"But many of your tales, if you'll pardon me, in fact most of them, have been, well — set in the tropics," the young member kept on.

Ffellowes stared coldly at him. "I was not aware, young man, that I had told any *tales*."

At this point, Mason Williams, the resident irritant, who could not let the brigadier alone, exploded. "Hadn't told any tales! Haw-haw, haw-haw!"

To my amazement, and, I may add, to the credit of the new election committee, this piece of rudeness was quashed at once, and by the same younger fellow who had started the whole thing.

He turned on Williams, stared him in the eye, and said, "I don't believe you and I were speaking, sir. I was waiting for Brigadier Ffellowes to comment." Williams

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shut up like a clam. It was beautiful.

Ffellowes smiled quietly. His feelings about Williams were well-known, if equally unexpressed. A man who'd been in all of Her Majesty's Forces, seemingly including all the intelligence outfits, is hardly to be thrown off gear by a type like Williams. But the defense pleased him.

"Yes," he confessed, "I *do* like the tropics. Always go there when I can. But — and I stress this — it was a certain hereditary bias. I acquired it, one might say, in the genes. You see, my father, and for that matter his, had it as well."

Again the young member stuck his neck out. Those of us, the old crowd, who were praying that we would get a story, simply kept on praying. Ffellowes was not mean, or petty, but he hated questions. But the boy plugged on.

"My God, sir," he bored in, "you mean your father had some of the same kind of weird experiences you've had?"

I don't know to this day why the brigadier, ordinarily the touchiest of men, was so offbeat this evening. But he didn't either dummy up or leave. Maybe, just maybe, he was getting so fed up with Williams he didn't want to let the young fellow down. Anyway, those of us who knew him leaned forward. Of course, Mason Williams did too. He hated Ffellowes but never enough to miss a story, which is, I suppose, an indication that he isn't completely mindless.

"If you care to hear this particular account, gentlemen," began Ffellowes, "you will have to take it second-hand, as it were. I wasn't there myself, and all I know comes from my father. However — he *was* there, and I may say that I will strongly resent [here he did not quite look at Williams] any imputation that he spoke to me anything but the absolute truth." There was silence. Total. Williams had lost too many encounters.

Said Ffellowes, "The whole thing started off the west coast of Sumatra. My father had been doing a spell of service with old Brooke of Sarawak, the second of the so-called White Rajahs, C.V. that would be. Anyway, Dad was on vacation, leave, or what have you. The Brookes, to whom he'd been 'seconded,' as the saying goes, from the Indian Army, were most generous to those who served them. And my father wanted to see a few new areas and get about a bit. This was in the fall of 1881, mind you, when things were different.

"So there he was, coming down the Sumatran coast, in one of Brooke's own private trading *prahus*, captained by old *Dato Burung*, picked crew and all that, when the storm hit.

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"It was a bad one, that storm, but he had a largish craft, as those things went, a big *Prau Mayang*, a sort of merchant ship of those waters. No engine, of course, but a sturdy craft, sixty feet long, well capable of taking all the local weathers, save perhaps for a real typhoon, which this was not. They all battened down to ride out the storm. They had no trouble.

"Surely enough, the next morning was calm and clear. And off the lee side, within sight of the green west Sumatran coast, was a wreck. It wasn't much, but the remnants of another *prau*, a *prau bedang*, the local light craft used for fishing, smuggling, and what have you. Ordinarily, this much smaller vessel would have carried two modified lateen sails, or local variants, but now both masts were gone, snapped off at the deck, obviously by the previous night's storm. The fragile hulk was wallowing in the deep milky swells, which were the only trace of the earlier wind.

"My father's ship bore down on her. He had given no orders, but a ship in trouble in these waters was fair game for anyone. Occasionally, hapless folk were even rescued. Dad stood on the quarter-deck in his whites, and that was quite enough to make sure there would be no throat cutting. Forbidding anything else would have been silly. Next to him stood his personal servant, old Umpa. This latter was a renegade Moro from the Sulus, but a wonderful man. He was at least sixty, but as lean and wiry as a boy. Whatever my father did was all right with him, and anything anyone else did was wrong, just so long as my father opposed it, mind you.

"To his surprise, as the bigger craft wore, to come up under the wreck's lee, a hand was raised. Beaten down though the little craft had been, there was someone still left alive. Dad's vessel launched a rowing boat, and in no time the sole survivor of the wreck was helped up to the poop and placed before him. To his further amazement, it was not a Sundanese fisherman who confronted him, but a Caucasian.

"The man was dressed quite decently, in tropical whites, and even had the remnants of a celluloid collar. Aside from the obvious ravages of the sea, it was plain that some time must have passed since the other had known any amenities of civilization. His whites, now faded, were torn at the knees, badly stained with green slime and ripped at various places. His shoes were in an equally parlous condition, almost without soles. Yet, the man still had an air about him. He was tall, a youngish man, sallow and aquiline in feature, with a hawk nose. Despite

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his rags, he bore himself as a person of consequence. His beard was only a day or two grown.

"'Captain Ffellowes, Second Rajput Rifles, very much at your service,' said my father, as this curious piece of human flotsam stared at him. 'Can I be of some service?'

"The answer was peculiar. 'Never yet, sir, have I failed in a commission. I should not like this occasion to be the first. With your permission, we will go below.' With that, this orphan of the gale fell flat on his face, so quickly that not even my father or the ship's captain could catch him as he slumped.

"They bent, both of them, quickly enough when the man fell. As my father reached down to take his head, the grey eyes opened.

"'At all costs, watch for Matilda Briggs,' said the unknown, in low and quite even tones. The lids shut and the man passed into total and complete unconsciousness. It was obvious to my father that he had only been sustaining himself by an intense effort of will. What the last piece of nonsense meant was certainly obscure. Who on earth was Matilda Briggs, and why should she be sought? As they carried the man below to my father's cabin, he had decided the chap was simply delirious. On the other hand, he was obviously a man of education, and his precise speech betrayed the university graduate. One can be excused of snobbery at this point. There were not so many of this type about in the backwaters of the world in those days, you know, despite what Kipling may have written on the subject. Most educated Englishmen in Southeast Asia had jobs and rather strictured ones at that. The casual drifter or 'remittance man' was a later type than one found in the 1880's, and had to wait for Willie Maugham to portray him.

"Well, my father took his mystery man below; the crew looted the remnants of the little *prau* (and found nothing, I may say, including any evidence of anyone else; they told the skipper that the mad *Orang Blanda* must have taken her out alone); and the White Rajah's ship set sail and continued on her way down the Sumatran coast.

"Dad looked after the chap as best he could. Westerners, Europeans, if you like, though my father would have jibbed at the phrase since he thought that sort of thing began at Calais, did this sort of thing without much thinking then. There were so few of them, you see, surrounded by the great mysterious mass of Asia. Outside the British fief, as the Old Man said, one felt A.C.I., or Asia Closing In. No doubt the feeling of the average G.I. in Viet Nam a few years ago. I know what they meant, having

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spent enough time out in those regions.

"First, the chap was, as I have said, a lean, tough-looking creature. As he lay there on my father's bed in the stern cabin, even in utter exhaustion and repose, his sharp features were set in commanding lines. His clothes, or rather their remains, which the native servants stripped off at my father's orders, revealed nothing whatsoever of their owner's past. Yet, as the ragged coat was pulled off the tattered shirt, something fell to the cabin deck with a tinkle and a glitter. My father picked it up at once and found himself holding a man's heavy gold ring, set with an immense sapphire of the purest water. Was this the unknown's? Had he stolen it? No papers, and my father made it plain that he felt no compunction in looking for them, were on the castaway's person. Save for the ring, and his rags, he appeared to own nothing.

"For a day, as the *prau* ran slowly down the coast, my father nursed the stranger as tenderly as a woman could have done. There was no fever, but the man's life had almost run out, nonetheless. It was simple exhaustion carried to the nth degree. Whatever the derelict had been doing, he had almost, as you chaps say, 'burned himself out' in the doing of it. Dad sponged and swabbed him, changed his personal linen, and directed the servants he had with him, as they all fought for the man's life. The ship's cook, an inspired Buginese, wrought mightily with the stores at his command, and nourishing soups were forced down the patient's lips, even though he lay in total unconsciousness.

"On the second day, my father was sitting by the man's bed, turning over in his hand the sapphire ring, when he was startled to hear a voice. Looking up, he saw that the patient was regarding both him and also what he held.

"'I once refused an emerald of rather more value,' was the unknown's comment. 'I can assure you, for whatever my assurances are worth, that the object that you hold is indeed my personal property and not the loot of some native temple.' The man turned his head and looked out the nearest of the cabin ports within reach. Through it, one could discern the green shoreline in the near distance. He turned back to my father and smiled, though in a curiously icy way.

"'The object you hold, sir, is a recompense for some small services, of the reigning family currently responsible for the archipelago which we appear to be skirting. I should be vastly obliged for its return since it has some small sentimental value.'

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"Having no reason to do otherwise, Dad instantly surrendered the ring.

"'My thanks,' was the languid comment. 'I assume that I also have you to thank for my treatment on board this somewhat piratical vessel?'

"The question was delivered in such an insolent tone that my father rose to his feet, ready to justify himself at length. He was waved back to his cushion by a commanding arm. After a pause, the unknown spoke.

"'As an Englishman, and presumably a patriot, I have some small need of your assistance.' The face seemed to brood for a moment, before the man spoke again; then he stared in a glacial way directly at my father, running his gaze from top to toe before speaking again. His words appeared addressed to himself, a sort of soliloquy.

"'Hmm, English, an officer, probably Sandhurst — Woolwich gives one rather less flexibility — on leave, or else extended service; speaks fluent Malay; seconded to some petty ruler as a guide into civilization, perhaps; at any rate, tolerably familiar with the local scence.'

"At this cold-blooded, and quite accurate appraisal (my family has indeed sent its males to Sandhurst for some time), my father continued to sit, waiting for the next comment from his bizarre guest.

"'Sir,' said the other, sitting up as he spoke, and fixing my father with a steely glare, 'you are in a position to assist all of humanity. I flatter myself that never have I engaged in a problem of more importance, and, furthermore, one with no precedents whatsoever. Aside from one vaguely analogous occurence in Recife, in '77, we are breaking fresh ground.'

"As he delivered this cryptic series of remarks, the man clapped, yes, actually clapped his hands, while his eyes, always piercing, lit up with glee, or some similar emotion. My father decided on the spot that the chap was deranged, if not under the influence of one of those subtle illnesses in which the East abounds. But he was brought back at once by the next question, delivered in the same piercing, almost strident, voice.

"'What is our latitude, sir? How far south have we been taken since I was picked up?' Such was the immense authority conveyed by the strange voyager's personality, that my father had no thought of not answering. Since he himself took the sights with a sextant every dawn, he was able to give an accurate reply at once. The other lay back, obviously in thought.

"Rousing himself after a moment, he seemed to relax, and

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and his chiseled features broke into a pleasant smile as he stared at my father.

"'I fear you think me mad,' he said simply, 'or else ill. But I assure you that I am neither. The Black Formosa Corruption has never touched me, nor yet Tapanuli Fever. I am immune, I fancy, to the miasmas of this coast, thought I take no credit for the status. In fact, I believe it to be hereditary. If the world would pay more attention to that forgotten Bohemian monk, Mendel, we should be in a position to learn much ... but I digress.' Once more he stared keenly at my father, then seemed to come to some private decision.

"'Would you, sir, be good enough to place yourself under my orders for the immediate future? I can promise you danger, great danger, little or no reward, but — and you have my word, which I may say has never yet been called into question — you would be serving your country and indeed all of humanity in aiding me. If what I have learnt is any evidence, the entire world, and I am not given to idle speculation, is in the gravest of perils.' He paused again. 'Moreover, I can not at this point take you into my full confidence. It would mean, for the moment, that you would have to follow my instructions without question. Is this prospect of any attraction?'

"My father was somewhat taken aback by this sudden spate of words. Indeed, he was both irritated and impressed, at one and the same time, by the masterful way the stranger played upon him.

"'I should be happy, sir, or rather happier, if I had your name,' he said stiffly. To his complete surprise, the other clapped his hands again and fell back on his couch, laughing softly.

"'Oh, perfect!' The man was genuinely amused. 'Of course, my name would solve everything.' He ceased laughing and sat up in the bed with a quick motion, and once he did so, all humor left the scene.

"'My name is — well, call me Verner. It is the name of a distant connection and bluntly speaking — not my own. But it will serve. As to any other *bona fides*, I fear you will have to forgive me. I simply cannot say more. Again, what do you say to my proposal?'

"My father was somewhat disconcerted by his guest's manners, but — and I stress this — one cannot realize what the circumstances were unless one had been there."

As Ffellowes spoke, and perhaps because he spoke, we *were* there, in the quiet waters off Sumatra, long, long ago. The silence of the library in the club became the silence of the East. Honking taxis, bawling doormen, straining buses, all the

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normal New York noises heard through our shuttered windows, were gone. Instead, with quickened breathing, we heard the tinkle of *gamilans* and the whine of tropic mosquitoes, the shift of the tide over the reefs, and smelled the pungent scent of frangipani blossoms. I stole one look at Mason Williams and then relaxed. He had his mouth open and was just as hung up as the rest of us. The brigadier continued.

"'I am astounded, sir, at your presumption,' my father said. 'here you are a —'

"'—veritable castaway and runagate, no doubt the sweepings of some Asian gutter,' finished the other in crisp tones, putting my father's unspoken words into life. 'Nevertheless, what I have said to you is so deadly in earnest that if you will not agree to aid me, I must ask that you put me afoot at-once, on yonder inhospitable shore, from whence, as you must have discerned, I have recently fled.' He stared again at my father's face, his piercing eyes seeming to probe beyond the mere skin. 'Come, man, give me your decision. I cannot idle away the hours in your yacht's saloon, no matter how luxurious. Either aid me, on my terms, mind you, or let me go!'

"'What do you need then?' It was my father's tentative capitulation. I can only say in his defense, if he should need one, that as he told me the story, Verner's manner was such as somehow did not brook any opposition.

"'Hah,' said Verner. 'You are with me. Trust the Bulldog.' My father professed to misunderstand the man, though the unedifying implications were plain.

"'I wish all of your maps, at once, particularly of this coast,' was Verner's next remark. "I have not been in these waters at all. I need the very best charts you possess.'

"My father bustled about, found all the maps he had, and as he had made something of a study of the area, he had all the best Dutch naval charts and whatnot. He brought them down into the big stern cabin. There, he found that in his absence, there had been a palace revolution of sorts. His captain, *Dato* Ali Burung, was on his knees before Mr. Verner, beating his head on the carpet, or rather, the straw matting.

"When the Asian arose, sensing my father's arrival, he had no shame on his flat features. 'We are going to help the *Tuan Vanah, Tuan,* are we not?' was what the chap said. Really, as my father put it, it wasn't enough that the strange traveler had seduced *him;* he had also somehow had the same effect on the toughest native skipper in the South China Sea! Whoever and whatever he was, Mr.

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Verner had, as you fellows put it, 'control.'

"'I am tentatively prepared to assist you in your quest, Mr. Verner,' My Old Man had given his commitment, and beyond 'unbelievable, but utterly true to type,' he heard no further particulars from his uninvited guest, who relapsed into silence.

"The next morning, they stood in to the coast. Western Sumatra in those days was much as it is today, I expect. They were well north of the *Mentawi* isles at the time, and just a bit south of the *Batus*. In there were, and no doubt still are, a thousand little anchorages. My father, or rather, old *Dato* Burung, found one of them. It was a tiny river, flowing into the sea under nipa palms, which almost arched over the entrance. It was the sort of place a Westerner wouldn't expect to launch a log canoe, but from which they had been turning out big seagoing vessels since well before the Christian era.

"There was even a small village, a *kampong*, as they say in those parts. The people thought they were pirates, my father said, and turned out the town for the ship. But Mr. Verner wanted nothing from them. He had ascertained that my father had a number of Martini-Henry rifles aboard, perhaps from old Burung. Even in those days, this was hardly the latest thing, but in any of the backwaters of Asia, a breech-loading rifle, even the old Martini, was a thing of rare worth. At any rate, Verner had taken control of the arms locker and twelve of the skipper's prize thugs were armed and standing guard on the beach.

"I daresay you wonder what my father was doing, to let himself and his ship be commandeered in this casual way. All I can give you is the story he told me. Verner, whoever he was, had simply 'taken over.' Dad told me that he violently resented everything the man suggested, but could not raise any objection, at least beyond commonplaces. He simply was no longer in charge, and somehow he had come to accept it.

"'Where are we going?' said Verner in answer to a question. 'Where I tell you, which is, as the crow is supposed to reckon matters, some twenty miles due north. There, hopefully, we will find a certain ship. This latter, we may or may not board. In any case, my orders are final. Is that quite understood?'

"The fellow's commands to the natives were delivered, I may say, in excellent Coast Malay. The timid folk of the local village came out and gave everyone garlands of flowers. No doubt, it was not the first time it had happened, but invaders who wanted nothing

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beyond food, and even paid for that, were something new. Yet, in retrospect, there may have been other reasons....

"Verner, as if he had nothing to do with it at all, stood on the beach among the mangroves, waiting for my father to give all the orders. Finally, Dad asked him what he wanted next. He confessed to me in after years, that the man was so much in charge, that if he had said 'jump in the river,' the crew would have done so despite the abundant knobs of salt-water crocodiles, imitating tree stumps on every shallow bank and bar.

"The guest of the sea was now wearing one of my father's linen suits although he refused a *Solah Topee* and went hatless. His ruined boots had been replaced by sandals, but the fact was, as Dad put it, Verner could have worn a loincloth, or some sort of sarong, and still have been as much in charge as if he had been the supreme Rajah of Bandung. One simply gave up arguing when around him. You tolerated his presence because the only alternative was killing him!

"'We must have food for two days and two nights,' said Verner to my father. 'We shall be going north along the coast for about that distance. Would you be good enough to order your remaining ship's people to remain in these parts for some four days. No, better five. Some mischance may delay us. After that, they may head north, until they either meet us — or do not.'

"Since the orders appeared already to have been given, and since the twelve toughest members of the crew of my father's *prau*, all armed to the teeth with not only their native cutlery but with rifles from my father's arms locker as well, were waiting, this latter would appear to have been only courtesy. But it was not. Verner himself made that plain.

"'Captain Ffellowes, I much regret the outward appearance of these matters,' he told my father. 'While I personally have no doubt of your trustworthiness, the simple folk you command feel rather more strongly concerning my mission. In fact, though you might attempt to divert them from their purpose, and, be it said, mine as well, you would do little more than present them with your carcass as a species of local signpost. Possibly, indeed, probably, impaled as well, on bamboo shoots. Should you desire this new impalement on your coat of arms (ghastly pun, really), you have only to urge my immediate arrest.'

"Frankly, as my father put it to me, the man was becoming an incubus, and he seemed to have no sense at all of what was due a fellow

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Englishman. Although my father was allowed his pistols, Colt's matched Bisleys as it happens, on his belt, two of the twelve hearties from the crew flanked him at all times. It was more than clear that he was along on sufferance. Twice, Verner came to a halt as they crawled through the vile coastal scrub behind the mangroves, but it was not my father whom he consulted, but rather old Burung, the skipper of the *prau*. The man himself seemed to feel somewhat abashed by this insolent favoritism of a native, and at one of the rest stops, he actually spoke to my father in some terms of apology. 'See here, Captain,' he said, 'it is a capital mistake not to accept the best local information one can get.' My father was by this time too affronted by Verner's behavior to pay him much heed. Yet — the man, by his very presence, somehow brooked no interference. Dad simply nodded. He felt, he told me later, it was as if he were in a dream, or suspended in space. The whole thing, from the arrival on board his vessel of Verner and all that had happened subsequently, seemed to be a walking nightmare. He wondered, how could all this be happening? The only rock in a failing world was his personal man. Umpa, who trudged sturdily along beside him. He, at least, seemed faithful to his master.

"Have I failed to mention the heat? It was bad enough at sea, off the coast, but here it was almost unbearable. The party was following a winding trail along the shore, though somewhat back from it, which wound through green coco palms, jackfruit plantations gone wild, rambutan and pure jungle. Sometimes they were under dank shade, with great tropical hardwoods towering overhead, shutting off the sun; the next moment they would break out into heavy yellowish rattan and lantana brush growth and the saber-edged grasses of the coast. This would be hacked through by the advance guard with their myriad steel weapons. The next instant they would be in slippery mud under the giant trees again. Leeches and ticks fell upon their necks at every instant; gnats and mosquitoes assaulted them continuously, but they kept moving through innumerable muddy bogs and across many small tidal creeks as well.

"As if this were not bad enough, Burung, as well as some of the other natives and Verner too, were constantly stooping over patches of mud, in order to see what appeared to be quite ordinary traces of game. Once, late in the afternoon, they called my father over and showed him, in high glee, some daub or other which seemed important to them.

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"'Look here, Captain,' said Verner. 'This can hardly fail to interest an old *shikari*, such as yourself!'

"My father looked and saw some spoor or other of an animal, large enough to be sure, in the bank mud of one of the many small estuaries through which they had just stumbled. The trace had four clawed footprints and was otherwise without meaning. It was indeed wet, that is, recent, with the water oozing in around the rim of the track, but beyond being the trace of some no doubt harmless creature, probably distorted by expansion, it appeared to have no significance whatever.

"My father's attitude seemed to annoy Verner a great deal, and without any further argument the man signaled to the others that they must press on. As they did so, Dad heard Verner say, as if to himself, 'Microcephalous! A case of simian survival!' The meaning of these phrases escaped him.

"At length, even Verner, who seemed made of iron, had to call a halt. He spoke to *Dato* Burung in low tones, and a camp was set up. My father, now stumbling with fatigue and insect-bitten to the limit, was gently passed along the line of marchers, until placed in the circle formed around the tiny fire they had lit. At this point, he related, he would not have cared much if they had told him that he was the main course in the evening meal.

"He roused himself, though, when he saw Verner seated next to him on the same rotting log. The fellow was almost as cool-looking as he had been on the *prau* after his recovery and, to my father's amazement, was in the act of fitting a clean paper collar to his very tattered shirt. God knows where he got them.

"At my father's gaze, something must have penetrated this strange person's subconscious mind. He finished dealing with his collar and without any affectation laid his hand on my father's knee.

"'I fear that you are still in doubt, my dear chap,' he said in vibrant tones. 'We are now far enough from the hue and cry so that one may elaborate without any fear of indiscretion. Pray tell me how I can serve you. Is there any matter on your mind?' The tones were as soft and caressing as those of a woman, and the man's whole attitude so charged with sympathy that my father almost wept. Exhausted and bemused as he was by what had transpired around him in the last twenty-four hours, he nevertheless retained enough energy to ask why this extraordinary jaunt through a trackless wilderness was necessary?

"'The matter is quite plain,'

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returned his singular congener. 'We are going to call upon a local ruler who is apparently dead, a native people who, though certainly native, are not people, and a ship due to be charged with more misery than any vessel that ever floated on this planet's seas. Finally we shall, I trust, destroy the scientific works of one Van Ouisthoven, who has been seemingly dead for fifteen years.'

"This flood of lunacy was too much for my father, who had been both physically and mentally taxed almost beyond endurance. He fell asleep, slumped over his own rotting log, even as he heard the final words of Verner's explanation. Yet the words stayed in his memory, so much so that even at his life's end, he could still recite them to me.

"It was not, however, to be a sleepless night. The noises of the great tropical rain forest were no doubt designed to make newcomers uncomfortable, but my father was an old stager at this sort of thing. Yet the cries of the civet cats, the hooting of the fish owls, the usual noises of insect and tree frog, none of these would have been sufficient to wake Dad. Suddenly, as he recollected, about 1 a.m., Verner and old Burung shook him awake. 'Listen,' hissed Verner, who actually grasped him by the collar.

"At first, my father heard nothing. There were the normal tropic sounds, the night wind in the great trees, the innumerable insects, locusts and such, the faraway cry of a sleepy gibbon, and that was all. But Verner's grip remained tight on his collar, and so — he listened. He could smell the reek of old Burung on the other side, full of garlic and menace, but the silence and the attention of the two finally got to him as well.

"Then he heard it. Over all the normal night noises, he heard the chatter of a squirrel. No one can mistake that nasty, scolding sound, and it came first from one side of the camp and then the other. The sound is the same in the Temperate Zone as it is in the tropics. But — and mind you, my father was an old tropic hand and a noted *shikari* — squirrels are not animals of the night. No scientist to this day has found anything but the flying squirrels active at night. And they are silent, or almost so. Also, this was deeper in pitch.

"Mixed with the chattering was a gruff, snarling bark, though that seemed to come only at intervals. Anything else he might have thought was shaken out of him by Verner. 'That is the enemy, Captain. They have already taken one sentry. Do you now feel my precautions to be unnecessary?'

"If this were not enough, the next thing was a sort of strangled choking noise from the other side of

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camp. Verner darted off like a flash, and came back almost as quickly. 'Another gone,' he said. 'We must move on in the morning, or they will pick us off like so many flies on a side of beef.' My father roused himself long enough to see that two more of the crew were detailed to stand sentry go, and then he relapsed once more into exhausted slumber. But, as he lay down, he was very conscious that something out in the great black forest was a hideous danger, clear and present. He fell asleep with dread on his soul.

"My father remembered nothing until he was roughly shaken in the first light of morning. He felt, and was, filthy, as well as being still tired, confused and angry at the way Verner had somehow pirated the loyalty of his men. Then he remembered the incidents of the night. He looked over and saw the very man himself, bent over a log which he was using as a table, in deep converse with my father's, or Rajah Brooke's, own captain, Burung. Ignoring the native crewman who was trying to give him sustenance in the form of cold rice, my father lurched over to the duo, who were his captors as he then felt.

"Verner looked up coldly at first, then seeing who had caused the interruption, smiled. It was the same glacial smile, to be sure, a mere rictus, but the strange man actually rose from his seat, and, as if by osmosis, so did *Dato* Burung.

"'Just the man we wanted,' said Verner. 'My dear chap, do come and look at this map. It purports to be the mouth of the river *Lubuk Rajah*. I fear you will be disappointed to learn that it was once considered by some to be the Biblical Ophir. The whole idea is, of course, beyond any reasoned belief. I, myself, when in the *Mekran*, found that .... Still, a most interesting and primitive area, geologically speaking. There is a young Dutch physician in these islands, Dubois, I believe, who is laying the ground for some splendid work on human origins. He is unknown to you? Strange how the body controls the mind, in terms of limitation, that is.'

"My father, who was, on his own admission to me given many years later on, only half awake, ignored this rambling and stared at the map which had been spread out on the rude table before him. There was indeed a river mouth and a small harbor. As an officer of the British Army, he was familiar with planes and gradients of the landscape, but here were other things on this map. There were lines, in various colors, extending around a central area. This central part appeared to be a settlement of some sort. In short, it looked like

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any typical village on any Southeast Asian coast, as observed and recorded by a European cartographer. Except for the odd lines, that is.

"He next heard his mentor, for so Verner had come to seem, in the same tone, but in excellent *Malay*, state the following: 'Those are their lines. They have an inner and an outer defensive circuit. We shall have to somehow go between them. Do you have any suggestions?'

"'Look here, Verner,' said my father. 'What the Hell are you planning to do?' Nothing but fatigue, he told me, would have made him use language of this degree of coarseness.

"'I had thought it would have been apparent to any child with even a board school education,' said Verner, turning back to stare at him with those strange eyes. 'I propose to destroy this entire village, root and branch, females, young, the whole — as our American cousins put it — shebang. All at once. And I fear that I am compelled to ask for your direct assistance in the matter.'

"My father stared at him. He was, after all, a British officer, charged with spreading our native virtues, *Pax Britannica* and all that it implied in those days. He was told now that he was to assist in totally obliterating some native village in a foreign colonial possession! It was fantastic! Do please remember this was long before genocide became a word in the English language.

"*Dato* Burung said something to Verner in Malay, but so fast and low that my father totally failed to grasp it.

"'Quite so,' said Verner, 'but we have none and should we seek a prisoner, we stand the risk of further alerting all the others. No, I think the *Tuan*, captain, will have to sleep. Then, perhaps he and I may make the trail together, and once and for all see what Van Ouisthoven's work has come to. Strange that this whole matter should have grown from a simple assessment of mining machinery.' This last sentence was in English.

"My father was at this point, utterly out of his wits, strength, and did indeed fall silent. His next memories as he listened were those of hearing Verner say, in his clipped tones, and musingly in English, 'There are strange rhythms in world events, yet none stranger than that of unpaid businessmen!'

"They were now on the march in the usual blazing dawn. They had wound, in the previous day's journey, much closer to the coast than he had thought. Only a few mangroves and giant Java plums kept them from the glare of light, which now burst over the hills to

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the east. The day brought with it the inevitable cloud of insect horrors to replace the night's mosquitoes. His face puffed up and his eyes swollen, my father faced Verner — the man had the same catlike neatness, despite their march — at a trail fork and demanded to know who was in charge.

"He looked at my father coolly enough. His first words cut off anything my father was impelled to say, quite short.

"'Do you know, Captain, anything about general assurance companies? No? I rather thought not. Then you will have heard nothing of Messrs. Morrison, Morrison and Dodd. You will be pleased to know that a highly respectable firm, of Mincing Lance, no less, is the cause of your present discomfort.' On receiving nothing but the blankest of looks from Dad, he continued in the same light, jocular vein, obviously amused to make some mystery of his remarks, as though, Dad said, they were not mysterious enough already.

"'All I know, sir,' interrupted my father, 'is that you have mishandled me in the most outrageous fashion, suborned and subverted my officers and men, the employees of His Highness, the Rajah of Sarawak, and finally taken us away on some dubious journey for an unnamed purpose. I insist, sir, that you tell me what —' At this point, my father fell silent, for as his voice rose, a wave of Verner's hand had caused a cloth to be thrown over his mouth by one of the burliest of his own crewmen, and despite his struggles, he was flung back upon a nearby tree trunk in the most compelling way. During all this, Verner continued to regard him in the most placid manner. When he had waited, as my father was compelled to admit, for his struggles to cease, he again waved his hand and the swaddling was removed. Meanwhile, Dad had seen old Umpa, his faithful servant, sworn to guard him with his life, quietly picking his teeth across the way!

"'Captain,' said Verner, leaning forward and staring into my father's eyes, 'behave yourself!'

"It was the rebuke one gives a child, and, my father was free to state, entirely successful. He sat quietly; the gag was withdrawn, and he stood in silence while listening to his interlocutor.

"'In a short time, Captain,' said the cold voice, 'we are going to carry out a murderous assault, by stealth, upon what appears to be a peaceful village. I cannot, even at this date, take you entirely into my confidence. However, I give you a few morsels of thought to mull over. Your men, starting with the captain, are the picked officers of

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the *Rajah Muda* of Sarawak. Think, man! Would they be likely to go over to a complete stranger such as myself, a castaway of no known antecedents, without the most compelling of reasons? Your own servant, that Moro savage, is with us. Do you dare exclude yourself?'"

There was a silence in the club library at this, and Ffellowes, who had lit a cigar, pulled on it gently before resuming. We were all so caught up that he could have said almost anything, but, even so, this was a point most of us had missed. Why indeed had the faithful crew of his Rajah's vessel turned coat so fast over to this wandering stranger?

"'The answer is simple, as are indeed most answers,' resumed Verner to my father. 'They believe most strongly in what I am doing. Why do you not ask them?'

"'*Dato* Burung,' said Dad to the old Bajau skipper. 'Why do you obey the strange *Tuan*? Why do you guard me as a prisoner?' He looked into the old man's jet eyes for the first time, seeing him not as a part of the ship, but as a *man*.

"'*Tuan*,' the old man spoke most respectfully. 'We have heard in the islands for many moons, and some few suns, that there will come a time when we will all rule ourselves. But, *Tuan*, not through those who are Not-men. We go now, under this strange *Tuan's* orders, to kill the Not-men. Only men should rule men. The *Orang Blanda*, even the great ones, are silly, but — you are *men*, of whatever strange, mad country. But — never Not-men, this is against the Law of the Prophet. These are *Efreets*, something not to be born. They must be killed.' The old pirate sighed and caressed his long drooping mustaches. 'It is quite simple, really.'

"This last piece of lunacy, as Dad told me, should have convinced any sane man that he had no chance. Instead, maddeningly, it swung him completely over to the other side. You see, he *knew* old Burung, and trusted him; had now for over a year served with him and his crew. Then there was Umpa, his Moro servant. He had been saved from execution by Dad's personal intervention. And he was a *Hadji*, had made the Mecca pilgrimage. He now stared at my father and nodded his head. If these men believed....

"My father's response rather startled Verner in fact, if anything could startle a man as much in control of himself as that cold fish.

"'I'm your man,' Dad said simply, stretching out his hand. 'What do we do next?'

"Verner stared at him for a moment, then a lean hand clasped his. 'Thank you, Captain,' he said,

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and nothing more. 'Now — I badly need your help. The innermost grounds of this place are unknown to me. I escaped, more by luck than anything else, from what seems to be the outer perimeter. As you must have guessed, we are not too far from the place off which I was so fortunate as to have you encounter me. There is a ship in the harbor there which must at any hazard be prevented from leaving. She must in fact be destroyed. She is the *Matilda Briggs*, of American registry, out of Tampa in the state of Florida, I think. Her charter is under grave suspicion. A bark of some 700 tons. No ship in the world has ever carried such a cargo of future misery in the history of the human race. I repeat, she must be destroyed, *at all costs.*'

"'Of what does this cargo consist?' my father asked.

"'Females and infants in arms, in all probability,' was the cool answer. The man's face was grave, however, and it was evident that he was not in jest. My father could say no more. He was now committed, on the sole basis of common trust.

"'Now,' continued Verner, in his usual icy manner, but speaking Malay. 'Let us plan our next move,' The six remaining crewmen moved in closer. They obviously knew something portended. The other two had been made guards, to watch both trails, north and south.

"'See here,' cried Verner, pointing to the map. 'This is the weak point, here at this juncture of slopes. It is very plain that here is where we must strike.' Then he said a curious thing, almost an aside, a remark baffling to my father. 'May God defend the right. If it *is* the right.' The comment was so unlike Verner's usual detached attitude that it stuck in Dad's memory.

"'We shall be well off enough if the *Dolfjin* does not play us false,' continued the master of the expedition. He seemed to be talking to himself as much as anyone else. 'She's only 250 tons, but she carries two 12 pounders. And yet my last message may not have got through.'

"With no more remarks, Verner proceeded to dispose of the whole party. Two men, the crewmen with the best edged weapons, were sent on ahead to act as an advance guard. The two sentries were called in and made a rear party. The remaining four, including old Burung, plus my father and Verner, made up the central column. Dad loosened his revolers in their holsters. He had been in some rough work more than once; yet he felt somehow that this business would take rank with the best of them. Verner seemed to carry no weapon at all, beyond a straight stick of some heavy wood he had cut.

"They were now on an obvious

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trail. It was early morning and the light was fair, despite the oppressive heat, even under the dark overhang of the giant trees. Moreover, the party was now heading inland, a bit away from the sea, in a northeasterly direction. Suddenly, as if by some species of legerdemain, they were confronted with an open area. The jungle simply stopped, and before them lay, in the morning light, a European village. Allowing for the tropics, there were fenced, brush-bordered fields, low peak-roof houses, chimneys curling with smoke, and in the middle distance a larger structure, hard to see through the morning mist, but also peak-roofed, which might have served as the headquarters of the squire, or what have you, with no trouble. Anything less likely on the Sumatran coast than this rustic view would be hard to imagine. It was as if a segment of Bavaria, or perhaps Switzerland, had been removed bodily to the tropics. To make the scene complete, off to the left was a tiny harbor, empty save for a three-masted bark at anchor. She was surrounded by boats.

"'They have learned well,' said Verner in cryptic tones. 'Come on, you men. We should have had some opposition by now. They must be leaving and we can afford no wait. There lies the *Matilda Briggs.*'

"Even as he spoke, they were surrounded. My father was a man of few words at the best of times, and in this description (I may say," said Ffellowes at this point, "I was a child of my father's old age) he always became somewhat incoherent.

"There were many of them, all larger than man-size. Their pointed faces were drawn back from the great yellow chisel teeth, which snapped and chattered as they came on. They barked, too, like giant dogs. They had been hiding in the growth at the edge of the fields, and now they rushed in upon the small party, their clawed hands; yes, *hands,* clutching great crooked knived and other edged tools. The early morning air was still, no wind or even a shadow of a breath; and as my father put it, their stink, an acrid bitter reek, came on before them. It was inconceivable, but it was happening. Even the stumpy, naked tails that flailed the air behind them as they scuttered forward on their hind legs seemed to add no more unbelievability to the whole scene. It was monstrous, incredible, impossible — and it was happening!

"Then, the Nineteenth Century, as my father put it, justified itself. All of the crew, as any of Brooke's men had to, knew how to shoot. The sharp crack of the Martinis rang out in the muggy air.

"The men could see the harbor,

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even as they fought. There was a stream of small boats putting out to the ship at anchor, shuttling back and forth. In between pauses in the fighting, each side drew breath, so to speak. Had they not had the advantage of firearms, my father told me, I venture to say that the small party of ten would have been overwhelmed in an instant. Even so, the courage of the creatures, or ferocity, rather, was astonishing. They removed their dead and wounded after each onslaught, and as fast as this was done, returned to the attack. Automatically, Verner took one flank and my father the other. *Dato* Burung, the old scoundrel, stayed with the center. Between them, somehow or other, they managed to hold the tiny line. More than once the monsters came to close quarters, but each time they were beaten back with cold steel. Verner, using only his heavy stick, disabled at least two of them personally, the stick revolving in a curious pinwheel manner, of point and side, that my father declared to be miraculous in its effect. But the attacks never ceased. There was, even though my father could not grasp the whole of the matter, an element of desperation about the way the creatures behaved, which was almost suicidal. Despite their immense strength, and the fact that their bulk much exceeded that of a man, they were clumsy with their weapons, and not only unskillful, but seemingly untrained in their usage. Save for a few barks and snarls at the outset, they were utterly silent.

"The whole affair could not have exceeded a quarter hour, but when it was over, my father felt that it had been going on for most of the morning. As suddenly as they had come, the monstrous enemy vanished, drawing off into the rice fields and the scrub which lined then. He was astonished to note the same placid harbor below and the small craft plying busily to and from the ship at anchor, so quick had been the onslaught.

"'Now,' said Verner, breaking in on his thoughts abruptly. 'We have two objectives, Captain. Yonder largish building, which abuts on the hill slope, is surely the central situation of these inimical creatures and must have been Van Ouisthoven's headquarters. As you can see, there are open-faced mine workings behind it, and a conduit as well. This it indeed must be, the *point d'appui*, of your section. I, on the other hand, will have to deal with the vessel in the harbor and attempt to ensure its total destruction. Am I clear?'

"If he was not clear, he had at least given orders; and a British officer, once he has accepted a superior, obeys orders, or did in those benighted days, before all this

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crapulous nonsense about morality came into the picture." (I have got to say here that this is the only time I ever heard Ffellowes do any "bitching," and he told me afterward that he simply was repeating what his father had said.)

"The idea of a 'section,' which in the British Army implied the use of a company or more, was laughable. My father," said Ffellowes, "found his first amusement at Verner's misuse of military language somehow consoling. The man was not God, after all, and did not know everything. This was a military operation and had best be run on military lines. Of the eight 'lower ranks' who had begun the fight, three were incapacitated, one being in point of fact — dead; the other two, badly wounded and in no condition to move at all. Of the remainder, all had cuts and bruises, including both Umpa and old Burung, who had bound a great flap of cut skin, blood and all, back under his turban. But they could go on.

"In the upshot, my father took three men, Verner two.

"'Should we not meet again, my thanks for your support,' said Verner in his chilly manner. 'It may comfort you to know that you have been involved in a matter far beyond the normal purlieu of the average Indian Army officer.' A cheery farewell, indeed! In addition, ammuntion was running low. Each man had no more than twenty-five rounds for his rifle, and my father no more than that for his two revolvers. He mentioned this latter to Verner and was dismissed with a wave of the hand.

"'Pray rendezvous at the harbor, my dear Ffellowes,' was all he got in response. With that, the man was off, his grubby white suit soon vanishing around the lower end of the forest. To do the man justice, my father never thought him a coward. And he still carried only his heavy stick.

"There was nothing left to do but head for the central building, the transplanted seat of the local squirearchy, or whatever. It seemed, through the morning haze, to sit in the center of the fields, against the hill behind; and as Verner had said, there was the scar on the green slope beyond it, the red earth visible in the morning sun, which clearly showed that something or other was being worked. Indeed, there was even a glitter of twin rails. My father was in the infantry, not the engineers, but he could see a railway if it were thrust at him. Some dim meaning of the horror that Verner had hinted at now came upon him. Something monstrous and inchoate, in terms of the world at large, lay before him. The busy little boats, shuttling out to the ship, the placid harbor, the

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frenzied attack by the great, tool-wielding beasts, all began to fall into a dreadul pattern. The sight of those shining rails, leading from the central building to the mine on the hill, crystallized it, into a fear which must at some time haunt the dreams of every thinking person.

"When I tell you that my father was a convinced antievolutionist, who thought Darwin a moral degenerate, the matter may become clearer still. Or may not.

"A narrow path led downslope through the fields, or rather paddies, for rice seemed to be the crop grown. Dense brush of the usual rattan and other thorny plants lined it, and the party tensed themselves for an attack. But none came. In the morning heat, so hot that a mist obscured the hills in the distance, only faint chittering cries and barks came from far away. Each moment the little party of blood-stained, ragged men tensed as they rounded a curve between banks of thick scrub. The men could no longer see the harbor and sometimes could see no more than a few feet ahead. Yet the hideous things appeared to have withdrawn, at least for the time.

"Nevertheless, the trace they followed seemed to lead in the direction of the large building, and once or twice they caught a glimpse of the raw face of the hill which lay behind it, over the tops of the fringing shrubbery.

"At length, when my father estimated that they must have covered a mile or more, Umpa, his old servant, who was in the lead, held up a hand in warning. They froze, and then Umpa signaled to my father to join them. As Dad stole up and as he crouched beside the old savage, an amazing sight met his eyes.

"Before them rose a gentle slope, of clipped grass, rising for a hundred yards to the veranda of the large building they had seen in the distance. The path, which was almost a tunnel under the overhanging scrub, debouched onto this lawn, for it was nothing less, quite abruptly; and as my father looked about, he could see other openings of a similar nature all around the fringe of the brush.

"But the building itself was even more startling. Minus the broad veranda, it was nothing more than a Dutch farmhouse, of the sort one can still see in Zeeland, though much larger than most. There was the peaked roof, the stuccoed walls, with wooden beams set between the stucco as facing, and even wooden shutters on the high-arched windows. Small balconies held massive urns full of bright flowers, and near the door were set large geometric flower beds, also bright with scarlet blooms. The only thing missing was

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a blonde maid in starched cap and wooden shoes, chevying hens away from the stoop. A more unlikely edifice under the circumstances would be hard to envisage.

"No smoke curled from the high brick chimneys though, and there was no sign of life. My father could make nothing of this, but he had his orders, and he waved to the men to follow him. Half crouching, half running, they raced across the lawn, all of them trying to see in every direction at once, waiting for an attack from any or all sides to overwhelm them. They were a little more than halfway when the big front door opened suddenly. Every weapon went up as one, and they all halted in their tracks. Yet no one fired.

"Before them stood an old bearded gentlemen, his ruddy face and snowy hair making him look like a tropical version of Saint Nick, a conceit not much accentuated by his costume, which consisted of a rather soiled duck jacket and equally dirty sarong. Old as he obviously was, there was no mistaking his urgency. His sharp blue eyes had nothing senile about them, and he waved them forward to him with a gesture of both command and urgency, peering about as he did so in a way that made his meaning plain, as plain indeed as his silence. My father also waved the others on, and in an instant they were in the hall of the house and the heavy door was shut and bolted behind them.

"The old chap addressed my father in sharp tones. When he saw that his Dutch gutturals were unintelligible, he switched to good, though accented, English. 'Are there no more of you? This is madness! We need at least a regiment to deal with my Folk. Did not my messages make this plain? And now they are *leaving!* You are too late!' His despair would have been comic had my father not seen what he had just seen.

"'Who the deuce are you, old chap,' he asked, 'and what on earth are you doing here?' He wanted to know much more, such as how the old man was still alive and a few other obvious things like that.

"His question seemed to stun the old gentleman. 'Who am I? I am Van Ouisthoven. This is my place, *Kampong De Kan,* my house, my laboratory. Who else should I be?'

"My father had an excellent memory. This was the name Verner had twice mentioned, that of a man 'dead for fifteen years.' Verner then, did not possess the key to all knowledge, despite his air of omniscience. But the old man was clutching my father's sleeve.

"'Did you not come in answer to my messages? Don't you know what has been happening? You

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have been fighting — you have met the Folk, that is obvious. Why are you here, then, if not to stop them? And, God help us, why so *few?*'

"In a few sentences, my father told the history of the past few days. The old chap was sharp as a needle, and he listened intently.

"'So — I see. Maybe a message did get through, maybe not, But, anyway, this other Englishman comes and he knows or guesses something. There was a disturbance some four days ago, and Grixchox (or something like that) would tell me nothing. So he gets away from them then; a brave man to come here alone to face the Folk! And you find him, and he, how to put it, takes over you and your ship.' His eyes grew thoughtful, then focused.

"'Listen. Everything rests on that ship out there. It must *not* get out, you understand me! I have been a prisoner here for a long while. But they do not kill me. They still remember that I taught *them!* But they do not know all my secrets. When they begin to learn, they scare me; I get just a few things in. But them — they are clever, they made me *not* nervous, they make me think I am their God, and all the time — among themselves — they plot. When the day comes, they kill all my Javanese boys quickly, yes, and their women and the little ones too. Only me they save. I can still teach them something, and — they do not forget that without me, they never *be!* Now, come fast. We have things to get. They are all down at the boat; that is why you got here alive, my friend. Come.'

"With no more words, he led them to the interior of the house, which went way back into the hill and was far larger than it appeared from the outside. The place was beautifully kept, by the way, old pictures on the walls, the floor spotless, rattan carpets here and there, and so on.

"Finally, Van Ouisthoven stopped at what was to outward appearances a blank section of wall between two large doors. Murmuring to himself in soft tones, the old man ran his fingers over the wall, an inlaid one of varicolored native woods. Then he gave a gasp of satisfaction and pressed hard. Silently, a great panel slid aside, and there before them lay a snug closet, perhaps ten feet deep and as much high and wide. In it were various shapes, covered with heavy canvas. The old Hollander flung this aside, and from my father and the others came gasps in their turn.

"Oiled and gleaming on its tripod base, funnel hopper feed mechanism seated in place, sat the fat brass cylinder of a Gatling gun! It was the small model, invented for the use of your New York police, I

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believe; but there were enough of them in service in the British and Indian Army that my father was fully conversant with its operation. Behind lay a stack of boxes, wrapped in brown oilskin, which could be nothing but its ammunition. A stand of Martini rifles and more ammunition stood next to it.

"'Get it out, at once,' shouted Van Ouisthoven, 'we get it down to the harbor and those ungrateful *schlems* learn something they didn't learn yet. But hurry! That crook Yankee what skippers the *Matilda Briggs*, he'll take them all off yet if we don't hurry! They have been giving him my gold for years!'

"In a few words, my father told the others what he wanted. One man carried four boxes of ammunition for the gun. The other two took the weapon itself, one being Umpa, who carried the tripod and another box. My father slung two rifles and gave the old Dutchman another, at the same time taking a pouch of rifle cartridges. They were all laden, but not so much so that they could not make good time. The urgency of what they were doing — though, to be sure, even my father only half understood it — somehow communicated itself to all of them.

"As they left the front door, my father was amazed to see the old man take a large box of wax vestas from his jacket pocket and calmly light a tall bamboo screen just inside the door. As it took fire, Van Ouisthoven turned to my father and said sadly, 'It must go. The whole thing. If some should survive, they must have nothing to come back to. All must go. And it is suitable. Here it started.' There was nothing in his eyes as he spoke but grim determination, and Dad could only begin to grasp what it must have cost the old chap. But he knew his history, and he remembered the men who cheerfully flooded their Dutch countryside in 1587 to turn back the Prince of Parma's Spanish Army.

"With no more words, the five of them set off down across the lawn and into another trail, this time headed for the harbor. Behind them a plume of black smoke came out the open door and began to rise in the heat of the steaming tropic mists.

"As they entered the new track, clear through the morning air, came the distant sound of a rifle shot, followed by others. With no word spoken, they all began to run, their various loads seeming light as they did. Van Ouisthoven's age was a mystery to my father, but he kept up gamely, his white beard jutting forward and his rifle at the ready.

"The trail they were on was a goodish bit broader than the narrow trace on which they had first approached the house, beaten

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smooth with much use, and presenting no obstruction to movement. They kept alert, the two Europeans guarding the flanks and moving first. The rifle fire continued in the distance; and grew louder as they advanced. How long they ran would be impossible to estimate, but suddenly they came into the open and saw a panorama which stayed riveted in their memories. My father could describe it, after a fifth glass of port, as if it had been only the day before.

"The tiny bay lay before them, a broad stretch of yellow sand skirting a calm blue lagoon. Some hundreds of yards offshore lay the bark at anchor, a shabby enough craft, her brown hull paint peeling, patched sails half up but idle in the almost windless air. Between her and the shore, boats, three of them, none large, plied steadily with paddles, all heading for the ship.

"Directly in front of my father and his group, Verner and his three seamen fronted the monsters. It was a curious situation. The three seamen, including Burung, were prone, firing at intervals, in unison, and only when there was a rush. Their ammunition must have been almost exhausted. Behind them, Verner leaned on his crude cane, somehow conveying an air of casual urbanity, as if bored by the whole proceedings, his shabby garments even now appearing neat, despite their rips and tatters. My father, who disliked the man intensely, was always careful to aver, nevertheless, that he carried himself in a very gentlemanly manner at all times.

"There were bodies on the sand between Verner's people and the Folk. Huge bodies covered with yellow-brown fur, great ivory chisel teeth fixed in death grimaces, strange hairy hands still clutching their crude knives. Behind them, in turn, were the rest of the Folk, the great males, in a circle, their horrid faces turned toward their enemies, their gruff barking notes and shriller chatter filling the air. Even as my father saw them, they were massing for another rush. In back of the ring of raging creatures were a mass of smaller brutes, many of them no larger than children. The Folk, or at least some of them, had been brought to bay, and their females and young were the cause."

As we heard this story, those of us who knew Ffellowes saw something we had seldom seen, I mean the man was *feeling!* As he told the final moments of this tale, the man was really moved. He illustrated his story with jerky hand motions, and there was actual sweat on his forehead! Whatever the truth of his yarns, and I have long since suspended judgment on them, there is no doubt about one thing, in this one anyway. The guy

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felt it! And it was supposed to have happened to his *father* back long before any of us were born!

He went on. "My father wasted no time. Several crisp orders and the Gatling was set up, with Dad holding the yoke bars. Old Umpa was the ammunition loader and emptied the first box of shells into the hopper feed.

"Get down, Verner, get down flat!' Dad bellowed. Verner, whose back was to them, fell as if struck dead. The others being prone already, a clear field of fire was possible. Dad began to turn the crank.

"The bellow of the Gatling drowned out all other noises, and my father traversed it back and forth as coldly as if he had been on a target range. Old Umpa, his dark, scarred visage expressionless, broke open the boxes and emptied cartridges into the hopper as calmly as if he were shelling nuts. The result was appalling. The great furry brutes went down like nine-pins, and as fast as those in front fell, the others behind followed. It was over in five minutes.

"My father stopped firing and the bluish smoke drifted in the faint breeze. The water at the beach edge was red, and so too were the sands. It looked like a slaughter-house. The bulky carasses lay in their gory death like so many shot muskrats, which indeed they resembled, save in size.

"Verner rose from the sand and dusted himself off in a precise, almost mincing way. His three trusties also got up, old Burung in the lead, and walked over to us.

"'You have justified my belief in you, Captain,' he said in his usual icy tones. 'These dangerous vermin were tolerably close to terminating a career which has not been without some small distinction. And who is this, pray tell?'

"It was a considerable pleasure for my father to introduce Van Ouisthoven to Mr. Verner, though the latter was, to be sure, as imperturbable as usual.

"'I see that the reports of your death, *Mynjheer*, have been considerably exaggerated.' Verner's voice was even chiller than its normal wont. 'You have much to answer for, sir. You have imperiled the entire human race by your meddling in matters better left to Providence.'

"His rebuke, however, went unnoticed. For even Verner had forgot the ship. Now, with a cry, the old Hollander pointed; and we all remembered her. Under easy sail, square sails set on the two foremasts, and gaff on the mizzen, the *Matilda Briggs* was standing out to sea. The three small boats which had been plying to and from shore drifted on the tide.

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"It was a beautiful scene, really. There was the brown ship, as lovely as only a sailing vessel can be, the azure waters, the fringe of *nipa* and coco palms on the shore, and then the open sea beyond the harbor's mouth. But it was horror! One thing had been made plain to my father; that the ship must not escape. And here she was, stealing out to sea, and they were helpless. The Gatling, though unparalleled at close range, was useless beyond two hundred yards, and the ship was thrice that already. Everyone stood in numb silence, and simply watched her go. And saw her end.

"Around the corner of the northern point of the bay, came the bow of a small black steamer with white upper works. And as she appeared, she began to fire, first the bow gun and then the stern, as soon as they could bear upon the target. She was not large, but on her staff she wore the blue, red and white of the navy of Holland. In silence the little crowd on the beach watched the annhilation of the *Matilda Briggs*. The two guns the gunboat used were not of great caliber, but the bark was a fragile thing, wood-built, old and hard-used. Her masts fell in seconds, and the fires kindled by the exploding shells were all over her in another instant. Ceaselessly, remorselessly, the warship fired. When she stopped and the echoes of her guns no longer resounded in one's ears, there was nothing on the surface of the lagoon, nothing but a smear of oily muck, some oily smoke, a litter of wood scraps, and the dark fins of countless sharks.

"'The *Dolfjin* has justified the Dutch naval estimates indeed those of the entire mass of all the world's navies,' came the didactic comment of Verner over my father's shoulder. 'A curious reflection on the rise of modern fleets, that one minute gunboat should prove the probable savior of the human race. She came only just in time,' he added.

"But my father was not really listening to Verner. He was watching Van Ouisthoven instead. The old man was walking slowly down the beach to the pile of bodies where the Folk lay, the males in front of their females and young. For some reason, my father followed him as he skirted the fringe of the mass of dead creatures and advanced slowly and with head bent on the last heap at the water's edge.

"While my father stood silent behind him, the old fellow began to pull the bodies apart in the last heap, the one nearest the water, ignoring the warm blood that stained his arms and clothing. Persistently, he tugged and hauled, shoving the great carcasses aside, until at last he was rewarded.

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"Something moved under his hands, and his motions grew more excited. My father drew one of his revolvers and stood waiting, poised for any eventuality.

"A blunt-nosed head appeared from under one of the larger shapes, and into the bright sun of noon wiggled a small furry creature, no more than three feet high. In one arm it clutched something flat, but the other hand it held out to Van Ouisthoven, squeaking plaintively as it did so. The man whom it addressed stood silent, his shoulders seeming to stoop even more, if possible. Then in the same absence of sound, Van Ouisthoven held out one hand — to my father. In the same bleak silence, as if no other noise could be allowed, my father handed over the revolver he held. He saw tears pouring down Van Ouisthoven's face. There was a shot. My father confessed he had his eyes closed at this juncture. Then a second shot.

"When Dad could bear to look again, two figures were clasped together. The old Hollander lay hugging the small shape of the last of the Folk, a bullet in his own brain. Beside them on the sand lay the object which the little thing had been holding so tightly. My father stirred it with his foot. It was a Dutch primer, brightly illustrated in color, with pictures of children in Holland at play.

"The next scene of the drama, or what have you, took place in the captain's cabin of His Netherlandish Majesty's ship, the *Dolfjin.* They were headed down the coast to pick up my father's *prau.* The Dutch naval officer had ceased his questions, and the interminable voice of Verner had taken up the tale. Through a fog of fatigue blended with irritation, my father tried to follow what the man was saying. His comprehensive dislike of the fellow's personality was palliated only by a genuine admiration of the man's attainments and perserverance.

"'It becomes quite clear, I think, to all present, that no report of this affair must reach any but the few constituted authorities, those who are cognizant to some extent, that is, of the problem. Were the facts to be made plain, I fear, some scientific rascals would be able to reproduce the late Van Ouisthoven's work. While he had a good degree from Leyden, he was hardly, save in sheer persistence, a genius, and it is highly possible....'

"Here, my father, who could not forget the old man's death, made some ejaculation or even swore, though this was most unlike him.

"'My dear Ffellowes,' said Verner, his voice losing some of its habitual *sang-froid.* 'No one is more cognizant than myself of that

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unfortunate man's dilemma. He must, perforce, destroy the very thing he had created. His last moments, which I also observed, were charged with remorse and grief. Yet, what choice had he? Or, indeed, any of us? His final actions, awful though they may appear to an observer, gave him rank with the leaders of the human race. He raised Caliban from the depths and to the depths he dispatched him.'

"My father said nothing. He was too sunk in weariness and sadness to venture further. Yet — for one moment, Verner's wiry hand had pressed his shoulder, and he felt the unspoken sympathy which the other could not express in any other way, both to the dead, and to himself. There was a silence.

"'To resume,' Verner continued, his high querulous voice cutting off any debate, 'the facts are indeed singular. They stem, in fact, from the unpaid bills of a Manchester firm of machinery manufacturers. These people, whose name is in the highest degree inconsequential to this story, retained in turn, my employers, Messrs. Morrison, Morrison and Dodd, who act only as appraisers of various mechanical artifices and manufacturers, but also, in a subsidiary vein, as assurers of the same. Thus are great affairs put in train! The bills of the original company were not being paid! A steady and reliable account had ceased payment, without prior notice! An outrage, in the ordered community of business! What transpired? Morrison, Morrison and Dodd were called in and found themselves at sea, literally and figuratively. The account was in the great Dutch island of Sumatra. Some ten thousands of pounds sterling were owed. The Dutch, when appealed to, could give no assistance.

"'The area in question was remote and feverish, on the so-called Tapanuli coast. Few ships called there. In any case, the Hollands Government could hardly prosecute a bankrupt on behalf of an English firm. They declined action. So the matter stood. But do not undervalue the persistence of the English man of business. He will follow a bad dept to the end. Hence my appearance in this matter, brought about by devious means and my own desires, let it be said.

"'When the matter was first put to me, I was at first totally disinterested. It seemed to have little of consequence, and less of any noteworthy quality about it. I was resistant to the idea of my services being engaged. Yet, I made a few preliminary moves. One of these was to frequent the numerous haunts in the areas of the London docks, where information on this

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part of the world might be ascertained, if patience were applied.

"'My patience was rewarded. Some mouthings of a dying lascar seaman in a den of the vilest description caused me to accept the commission. What the fellow said was vague and in the highest degree inconclusive. Nevertheless, it brought me out here to the East. For, in speaking of the very area of coast in which we now find ourselves, he said something of great interest.

"'Do not go there,' he choked out. 'That is the land of Not-men. Men like you and me, we are killed on sight!'

"'So, by strange methods, including enlisting persons so lofty in stature they may not be mentioned on this vessel, through a previous indebtedness to my humble person, I secured the right to go anywhere in these islands. And also to ask for the aid of such Dutch naval craft as might be available. In fact, I could tell my colleague here to sink anything he saw moving on this coast.

"'And so by circuitous means,' continued Verner, 'I came to one Cornelius Van Ouisthoven, the original bad debtor of my employers. The man was presumed dead. Not one relative in his family had heard from him for many years. But — and a large BUT it was — he had ordered mining machinery, railway machinery, all sorts of machinery, and had not paid for it, that is, after a certain point in time.

"'I found myself with a curious and unsolvable equation, involving this hitherto unknown Dutch gentleman, whose background I was at some pains to look into. Added to him there was some unpaid-for machinery, and finally, as I drew closer to the area in question, more and more rumors about a land where *men* were not welcome!

"'So curious were all these circumstances that I felt I must investigate in person. I did so, and the results were as you know. I found myself the prisoner of these creatures the old gentleman chose to call "the Folk."

"'I managed to escape and even flee the harbor in one of the native craft whose previous owners, no doubt innocent fishermen, the Folk had slain. These vessels, which were beyond their management, were left drawn up on the beach.

"'I have not been so fortunate as to secure Van Ouisthoven's notes, but I rather fancy I can piece together the main *membra*.

"'Briefly, the old man was a biologist, and one of extraordinary patience. He bred some native rodent, almost certainly *Rhizomys sumatrensis*, the local so-called,

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"bamboo rat" to extraordinary size. In my dissecting days at Barts, various genera of the *Rodentia* were exposed to me, and I well remember noting that this particular species had very well-developed paws, quite resembling hands, in fact.

"'Hands come before brains, you know. This is the most recent opinion. Without grasping organs, our peculiar human brains would be worthless. So, the old recluse went on with his work. And, from what you tell me. Ffellowes, he succeeded.

"'Brain is an inevitable increment of size at this rate. These vermin are quite clever enough as it is. Someone at the British Museum has deduced that there are four thousand species of rodents on the planet already. But if we are to be supplanted, let it be in due course. Even the old man agreed with that at the end.'

"And there," said Ffellowes, extinguishing his cigar, "my story, or 'tale' if you like, Williams, ends. My father was returned to his own vessel, he continued his cruise through the islands, and no report of any of this exists anywhere, unless it be in some hidden archives of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. That is all."

There was a longer silence this time. It was broken by the younger member who had brought on the whole business in the first place.

"But, Brigadier, with all respect, sir, there is something vaguely familiar about all this. Who was this man, Verner, or whatever he called himself? He sounds like some creature of fiction himself."

Ffellowes' answer was — well — typical. He stared at the young man coldly, but not in anger.

"Possible, no doubt. Since I never read sensational literature, I fear that I am in no position to give an answer. I have nothing to go on, you understand, but my father's unsupported word. I have always felt that sufficient!"

After a much longer silence, the brigadier was found to have gone, as silently as always. And, as usual, no one else seemed to have anything to say.

GORDON R. DICKSON will be in F&SF's 25th Anniversary Issue - October 1974

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Haskell Barkin writes: "I'm 40 years old and live (in California) with one wife, two children, two siamese cats and 27 fruit trees. I've been a stage manager, actor and playwright; I currently earn most of my living doing political public relations writing." Mr. Barkin has been published in *Playboy* and *Ellery Queen's*, and we welcome him to these pages. You will too.

Mr. Sperling Bugs Out

by HASKELL BARKIN

Two men came to Fred Sperling's house in the San Fernando Valley one morning and covered it with a tent made of rubberized canvas. It took barely half an hour, from the time the truck rolled into the driveway, for the house to be hidden inside a shapeless bundle whose bottom edge was weighted firmly to the ground to make an airtight seal.

The covering was made up of square sections, each about ten feet on a side. They were orange, green and blue. No stranger would have guessed that inside was a one-story white stucco house with contrasting yellow shutters.

"Looks like you sold out to the circus," Sperling's next-door neighbor said, a woman too dumpy to wear the brief shorts she had on.

Sperling answered without taking his eyes off the workmen.

"It's costing me four hundred dollars, but they guarantee there won't be a living thing inside this time tomorrow." He turned to his neighbor, his smile changing to the sober expression of a man who knew what he was talking about. "Chances are your place is infested, too. Better start saving up. Gas is the only way to make sure they're killed, you know."

"I doubt we have that problem."

"You got 'em. Damn termites are everywhere. Start saving up, Mrs. Welker."

"Last chance, Mr. Sperling," one of the workmen called. "Everything out of the house? Plants? Pets? People?"

He laughed at his own joke.

"All cleared away before you came," Sperling said.

"I'm going inside to double-

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check before we feed the gas in. Always like to double-check personally. You'd be surprised how many people try to sue us for dead plants and cats."

"No pets in this house. Only bring in fleas."

Sperling followed the workman in through the last unzipped section of canvas before the front door. The open windows in each room looked out onto the rubbery film that barely hinted of the sunlit Los Angeles morning outside.

"It's like an eclipse all of a sudden," Sperling said.

"Some people can't take it. Had one guy walk two steps into his house and start turning green."

"I see what you mean. This gloom and the rubber smell make the living room seem kind of unfamiliar. Chilly, too."

Suddenly he wanted to scream a final victory cry at the termites who lived on his joists, feasted on his floorboards, engorged themselves on the rafters of his home.

Instead, Sperling said, "All checked out?"

"Finally get to you?"

"The sooner we're out, the sooner you can start."

The workman followed him and sealed the final gap in the covering. He attached the hose to a fitting in the canvas, then signaled his partner to turn the valve on the steel cylinder. The gentle hiss of the gas and the rustling of the canvas seemed sweeter to Sperling than any sounds he could remember.

"We'll take down the canvas about this time tomorrow," the workman said."

"Can we move right back in?"

"Perfectly safe by then. The gas is all decomposed."

Sperling drove to his brother-in-law's house where Ann, his wife, was waiting with their twelve-year-old son Herbie. The plan was for the three of them to stay the night there. But the moment he stepped through the doorway his brother-in-law announced that he was going to drive Herbie and his own son to a local campground. The two youngsters would spend the night out of doors.

"I've camped out lots of times before," Sperling's nephew said. "We got sleeping bags, a tent, and everything."

"Can I, dad?" Herbie said. "Please?"

His mother said, "I already told you it was okay, honey."

"Then there's nothing for me to add," Sperling said. He would give her that, considering how much she disliked the inconvenience of being away from her home even though it was for her own good.

His brother-in-law and the boys drove off.

"You feel like lunch?" Ann said.

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He followed her into the kitchen and sat at the counter while she checked out the refrigerator.

"Well, he'll come home scratching insect bites, and that'll cure him of camping once and for all," he said. "I don't understand why people want to put themselves through all that trouble."

"You might try it with him once and find out."

"I let him go, didn't I? That's enough."

An ant moved across the Formica counter top. Sperling rubbed it out with a napkin.

"I'm not hungry," he said. "If your brother wasn't so cheap, he'd have this place fumigated. I don't know why I let you talk me into coming here."

"Because they invited us. And because most motels are infested from top to bottom, if I remember your words correctly. Now, do you want this tuna sandwich I've made for you or not?"

"I'll eat it in the living room. And I hope you have plenty of calamine lotion in the medicine cabinet when he comes back."

The next morning Sperling couldn't wait to get over to his house. He turned the corner and there it was, a colorful gift-wrapped package set down amidst the familiar homes on his street.

He left the car and looked up at the gentle curves of the canvas. A surge of excitement went through him. There are few battles in life you can win so absolutely, he told himself. Wives get nasty with age; sons grow into demanding strangers; bills become larger each month. But here was pure satisfaction.

As he stared at the balloon, its shape seemed different, not so full as yesterday, perhaps. Well, some of the gas probably seeped out.

The workmen arrived and exchanged cheery good mornings with Sperling. One of the men zipped open a seam of the canvas and was about to move on to another when something caught his eye. He went back to the opening and flipped the canvas aside.

It seemed to Sperling, watching from the sidewalk, that he looked in for a long time.

"Hey, Charlie, come here," the workman called with a queer sound in his voice.

The second man sauntered over and peered in.

He said, "What in the name of—"

"You ever see anything like that?"

Sperling started across the lawn to them. "What is it?"

"Nothing, it's okay."

"It didn't sound okay."

The workman zipped the seam shut. "I have to call the boss," he said. "Don't worry about it, Mr. Sperling."

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"You mind telling me what it is?"

"You better wait until the boss gets here."

"I want to know what's upsetting you two like this. If you won't tell me, I'll look for myself."

The first workman stepped between Sperling and the house.

"We're professionals, Mr. Sperling. We're licensed by the state. The best thing for you to do is not interfere until Mr. Leslie comes."

Fifteen minutes later a car pulled into the driveway, and a man with white hair and a red face got out. The workmen were with him before he could close the car door, hurrying him up to the house.

Sperling left his car and followed. The white-haired man, Jake Leslie, opened a seam and looked inside.

"What's in there?" Sperling said.

Leslie turned to him. "Are you the owner?" His voice was flat, like a telegram. "I been in this business thirty-one years, and I've never seen anything like this."

"Like what?"

"Pack it up," he said to the workmen.

Sperling and Jake Leslie watched as the colored panels were removed. Finally the last sections tumbled onto the grass.

"Don't just stand there," Leslie said to the gawking workmen. "Get them rolled up and into the truck."

Where Sperling's white house with the yellow shutters had once stood, there was now only a brick foundation and chimney, plumbing pipes and vents going up, down, and across, and, lying on the earth the metal and plastic remnants of Sperling's furniture.

Sperling and Leslie walked among the debris. A fine dust covered everything.

"It's sawdust," Jake Leslie said, sniffing it from his fingertips. "Doesn't appear to be a single piece of wood left."

"What happened?" Sperling said.

Leslie didn't answer, just continued walking like a tourist at a Roman ruin.

"What happened?" Sperling demanded, kicking up dust as he ran up to him. "You destroyed my home. It's like a bomb went off. What the hell did you do?"

"This was a standard job. I don't know what happened."

"I asked you for gas and you pumped in vitamins."

"We used the same gas we use all the time, and, believe me, it isn't vitamins."

"Then you tell me what happened."

Jake Leslie squatted and ran his fingers through the sawdust. "The funniest thing is, I haven't seen a

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dead termite yet. Not one. I just don't understand it."

"You'd better find an answer fast. Because I'm suing you, Mr. Leslie. I'm suing Superior Exterminating for my house. For my furniture. And for my peace of mind!"

If Sperling was angry, Mrs. Sperling was furious when he told her the news.

"It's your fault!" she said. "You insisted on spending four hundred dollars to fumigate the place for no reason at all!"

"Except to get rid of termites."

"I'm sick and tired of you and your termites. And your ants before that. And your roaches before *that*. If you spent as much time being a good father as you do worrying about insects —"

"What's the matter with me as a father?"

"Well, for one thing, Herbie's been aching to go camping for two years, ever since my brother's been taking Larry."

"I let him go today, didn't I?"

"Sure, after cursing him with insect bites. You've got insects on the brain, Fred Sperling, and now see what it's finally done to us!"

She enveloped her head in her hands and began crying. They were sitting in their car in front of their more-or-less vacant lot.

"Oh my God," she said. "We were supposed to be at the campground an hour ago to pick up the boys."

The Sperlings found their son and his cousin waiting on the bench outside the ranger station.

"We thought you forgot us," Herbie said.

"We had something come up suddenly, honey," Ann Sperling said. "Put your gear in the trunk and we'll head back."

"It was great, dad," Herbie said as they drove off. "I didn't get bit once. No mosquito's getting inside that tent. It seals up tight, with screens and everything. Can I go again?"

"You may be spending more time in a tent than you think," Ann Sperling said. "We may all be."

"Stop that crying," Sperling said. "Now you're getting on my nerves."

"You're a fine person to pick at me after what you've accomplished."

"It's Superior Exterminating accomplished it, and you can bet your sweet life they're going to pay for it."

"What *happened?*" Herbie said.

"Our house has disappeared honey," his mother said.

"How come?"

"Nobody knows how come," Sperling said. "I don't want to talk about it any more."

They drove in silence to his

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brother-in-law's house, and related the day's sad events. Sperling's brother-in-law invited them to stay with him until they could make more permanent arrangements.

"Why, thank you, that's awfully sweet—" Ann began.

"But we don't want to impose," Sperling said, and received a glare from his wife in return. "I've already made arrangements at a motel. Thanks anyway."

"What motel?" Ann said.

"The Holiday Inn, if you must know."

"I don't think you did. And if you did, you call right now and cancel out because we're staying here."

"Ann, I would like to talk to you privately."

"Anything you have to say to me you can say right in front of everybody."

"Okay, then, I am spending the night at the Holiday Inn, and you're coming with me."

"Try and make me."

"Now look, folks," her brother said, "you're both upset by what happened to the house, and I'm sure if we all sit down and calmly—"

"You know why Fred doesn't want to stay here? I'll tell you why. He thinks this house is infested with insects. He has insects on the brain, this husband of mine. He thinks they're coming after him. I've lived fifteen years with a man who has never stopped thinking about roaches and ants and beetles and flies for more than twenty seconds at a time. And what's it come to finally, but a house reduced to sawdust? Well,' I hope you enjoy your Holiday Inn, and good night. Come on, Herbie, it's time you had a bath. You smell something awful."

With that she marched out of the living room, leading Herbie by the hand.

"Look," Sperling said, "what she said about your house—"

"You're welcome to your opinions," his brother-in-law said. "Now you'd better get on to the Holiday Inn because they might not honor your reservation."

Sperling had not made reservations at the Holiday Inn, of course, and when he showed up at the desk, they were full. He stopped at the Angeles Motel down the street, and they were full too. It was getting dark and he was hungry. He drove to a local restaurant that he and Ann went to.

The waiter greeted him warmly and asked where his wife was. Sperling studied the menu. It occurred to him that he had never seen the kitchen of the restaurant. The thought of what might live there made him lose his appetite. He apologized to the waiter and went out, leaving a fifty-cent tip.

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He drove looking for another motel. He passed by two because he knew they would have bedbugs. He imagined Ann asking how he could tell, and her voice grated away at his nerves.

"I can tell, that's all," he said to her, as he so often had in the past. "And if you don't like my caution, we won't take trips any more."

He stopped at a supermarket and bought a quart of milk and some cookies, which he ate in the car. Then he went to the phone booth in the parking lot and began looking up motels, until he saw a large black beetle crawling along the floor of the booth. Sperling slammed the door open and hurried back to his car.

A couple of hours later he signed into a motel that seemed clean but would cost him thirty-five dollars for the night. He went to a movie and left halfway through. There just wasn't a comfortable position for him in the seat.

Back at the motel Sperling lay fully dressed on the bed and watched television. His skin seemed to tingle all over. Suddenly he realized he was scratching the inside of his arm, and discovered a red welt there.

"I want the manager," he said into the phone. "This is room two thirteen and I want the manager here right away."

The manager was a grandmotherly woman with a voice deeper than Sperling's.

"This motel is absolutely clean," she said.

"What do you call this on my arm?" Sperling said. "I'm taking you to the Board of Health. People like you ought to be thrown into jail, to say nothing of being thrown out of the hotel business."

"I don't know what you have on your arm, but you certainly didn't get it here."

"We'll just see about that."

Sperling grabbed his coat and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" the manager said. "You checked into this motel. You can't leave without paying. I could've rented this room two times over."

"Don't worry, you'll be hearing from me."

"You bastard!" the manager shouted at Sperling as he drove off.

Sperling drove aimlessly for an hour, passing scores of motels without bothering to slow down. Suddenly he realized that he was around the corner from his own street and that he was bone-tired. He turned down the street and stopped in front of the wreckage that used to be his home.

The lights were still on next-door. Sperling thought of asking his neighbor to put him up for the night. He wondered how clean the house was and decided he

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was too exhausted to care. His pride was another matter. Could he face her, and ask a favor, considering what had happened to his perfect victory?

He sat immobile in the car. The lights next-door went out. In the moonlight the chimney and pipes of his own house reminded him of a play setting.

Then Sperling remembered that his nephew's tent and sleeping bag were still in the trunk and that the tent could be sealed absolutely snug against mosquitoes.

He carried the tent into his backyard and after a few mistakes got it assembled. Sure enough, there were screens front and back that zipped up tight. Inside the tent he wriggled into the sleeping bag and zipped it up against the chill night air.

He yawned and turned over on his side. Sperling felt himself relaxing for the first time in hours. The moonlight gave a comfortable glow to one side of the tent.

Things weren't so bad after all, he decided. He'd collect enough from Superior Exterminators to replace the house and probably have a few dollars left over. Nothing like a brand-new house. You can build it right. You know it's clean, and sound, and uninfested.

Later Sperling opened his eyes at the sound of something rustling. The moonlight, brighter than ever, had turned the tent side into a large screen on which were projected the crawling shadows of hundreds of insects.

Sperling stared, and the insects turned into leaves. Of course, the eucalyptus tree. He tried to sleep, but opened his eyes again to see the shadows grown larger and the shapes more distinct.

He gasped, and with that breath something jagged cut into his lungs. Then Sperling heard a gentle hissing, like gas.

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GEORGE ZEBROWSKI

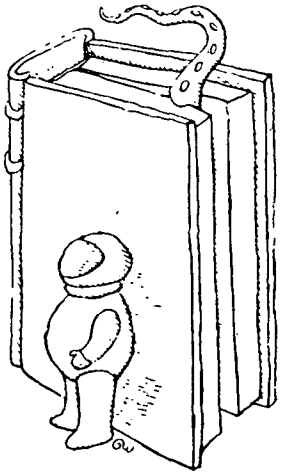
Books

Stanisław Lem: *The Invincible*, Seabury Press, 1973, 183 pp., $6.95.

Stanisław Lem: *Memoirs Found In A Bathtub*, Seabury Press, 1973, 188 pp., $6.95.

The past year saw the first English publication of two more novels by the Polish writer-philosopher-futurist, Stanislaw Lem. Darko Suvin has called him the writer who "has singlehandedly become the fourth great pillar of global SF since World War II," the other three being American, British and Russian SF. His first novel in English was *Solaris* (Walker & Co., N.Y. 1970), a good translation from the French. (Books, F&SF, May 1971). But Lem has been writing since the early 50's; only the cultural-language lag makes him seem a new writer.

Lem is an intensely critical writer, a conscious artist who can think as well as feel and express. He knows Western SF intimately, its virtues and failings, and has responded with superior works of his own, as well as with criticism which only a few here are competent enough to discuss. He is a major intellectual figure on the continent who also happens to be an SF writer — as well as a screenwriter, literary critic and futurologist. Very likely he is also the best selling SF writer in the world, with translations in thirty languages and sales of more than six million copies—one of the few weddings of quality and popularity. The rest of the 1970's will see the



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publication of his fiction in English by Seabury Press - Continuum Books, as well as his nonfiction. The two volume study of science fiction, *Fantasy and Futurology* is a trenchant analysis which should prove influential and provocative. The two volumes are a systematic attempt to approach the aesthetics and practice of science fiction. No one has ever defined the task and executed it with this kind of attention to science, philosophy, future studies and literature. Like Lem's other non-fiction, the work is a major intellectual contribution in and outside the field of science fiction. We have no such work here. We are too casual about SF in the West, too shy about intellectual virtues. The readers are too parochial about the field, paying little attention to genuine achievement in outside fields. The writers are not ambitious enough, too ready to practice SF at every level of quality except their best, yet ready to think of themselves as thinkers (which we are not) and pretenders to literary quality (which we sometimes achieve along with little else). There are large issues to consider, and I'll return to them more specifically after considering the two Lem novels at hand.

The Invincible is an elegant, tragically beautiful story filled with technology and strangeness—all the things a reader might expect from a novel by Poul Anderson or Andre Norton at their best. But when the story reaches its logical development, when we have learned everything we can about what has been happening to the starship Invincible's crew, and what has happened to the previous expedition to Regis III, a planet where evolution has taken a mechanical-cybernetic direction, then Lem continues to climb, making painfully real to the reader the sight of humankind and its values confronted with an alien, mechanical system.

Let me try to indicate why this novel is good. The usual science fictional explanation of why the Invincible's crew is being attacked by cybernetic insects and war machines would be that there is an intelligence on the planet, analogous to our own and capable of being understood. Lem takes a more original approach, after destroying this notion as a peculiarly human illusion. He suggests instead that the behavioral appearance of intelligence might be present where in fact there is no conscious intelligence. Lem realistically shows us what it would be like to come face to face with genuine "differentness" — an alien non-human system or being which is beyond our understanding. If heavily reinforced, the crew of the

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Invincible could do no more than systematically destroy the planet's animations, and to no purpose except the self-satisfaction of revenge and the meaningless exercise of power. We go out into the universe only to meet ourselves and we fight with ourselves. The crew of the Invincible triggers the responses of a mindless system, which in turn triggers our old instinctual behavior; an enemy is born, and all our cleverness, reason and knowledge goes into supporting that falsehood, while the facts are ambiguous, opaque, always partially beyond interpretation or explanation. Knowledge is never complete, though it can be vast; the puzzle of the universe and our consciousness deepens the more we know.

The frequently total answer to difficult problems, so much a part of the SF we know, is the point at which Lem diverges from Western SF. "The extent of my knowledge," a character in the novels says, "is not the same as what exists or might exist..." Lem is dealing with ignorance and error as well as with knowledge. In *The Invincible* he shows us the amalgam of these three elements and the organized human being, who is an open-ended system in conflict with a closed alien mechanical system which has simply adapted to the conditions of Regis III. The human military entity initially behaves routinely, mechanically, at great cost in lives; until it recognizes the uselessness of a conflict which it is ultimately carrying on with itself. Lem makes us feel this realization keenly, as Navigator Rohan discovers that his commanding officer was blindly drawn into a struggle in which there was nothing to gain through fighting, except the stimulation of an absurdly mindless force.

When this point of understanding is reached, the only reason for staying on Regis III is to rescue a number of missing men. Human values then replace the aims of military procedure, as Rohan goes out into the weird landscape in search of his fellows. When he returns, the sight of The Invincible suggests the reality of human courage which he feels within himself. It is still tangible despite the imperfectly understood situation to which it has had to apply itself.

Western SF writers often make it difficult to understand why anything should ever go wrong, given our knowledge. The experiment always works. There is rarely a realistic depiction of the unknown; and even rarer is the trembling sight of the complex interface between the known and unknown, with all the attendant difficulties of adequate explanation and accomodation into established

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theoretical structures. And there is almost no serious treatment of an unknown which might never fit into the ways we conceive reality. Lem knows the reality of failure and inconclusiveness; he knows when to stress one or the other. He knows that we are partial mysteries to ourselves, hence growth and discovery are possible. The universe is greater than the forms we try to fit on it.

Consider an example. The universal translator, a facile SF convention, enables earthmen and aliens to converse while the story goes its way. Lem, by contrast, would be interested in the agonizingly difficult drama to be found in a realistic encounter with an alien civilization. A number of things are possible: 1) communication between beings of similar types would always be possible, while 2) communication between radically different types (if they exist) would shade off into the impossible. A translating device presupposes meaningful contact in order to construct the device. The SF writer who uses one knows too much, and too little.

The Invincible is a kind of companion novel to *Solaris*. The two novels were issued in one volume in the Polish edition of 1968, where I first encountered them. The sentient ocean of *Solaris* (probably the greatest portrait of a genuine alien in all science fiction) might be intelligent, while the adaptive organized mechanical system in *The Invincible* seems blind. What is finally so satisfying in both novels is that hand in hand with Lem the concept-maker goes Lem the observer of human irrationality and the pervasiveness of emotions. *Solaris* and *The Invincible* are two of the few works of science fiction capable of moving us deeply. Ten years or more ago Algis Budrys took a step in this direction with a novel called *Rogue Moon*, which contains a human and alien puzzle worthy of Lem. Lem believes in the unknown which surrounds our island of scant knowledge and protective convention. He believes it emotionally and artistically, as well as considering it a problem in the philosophy of science. As a result he writes seriously about far worlds, alien cultures, star travel, and all the too often bloodless possibilities of science fiction.

Memoirs Found In A Bathrub takes us inside a huge future espionage center, in which all decisions, indeed all perceptions of reality, are solipsistic and random. The novel is a satire studded with humorous devices and procedures, for example the "polygraph mittens" which the Kafkaesque narrator learns are used by the other

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operatives in his profession. The novel gave me a hint as to why Lem is an enthusiast of Philip K. Dick's work.

Memoirs demonstrates that Lem is not to be identified exclusively with the hard-science futuristic type of sf novel. He is equally a master of the wilder, not necessarily realistic type of story. And yet both *The Invincible* and *Memoirs* give only an indication of Lem's range of style, approach and subject. (His conceptualizing and imagination, his knowledge of science and philosophy, would be wasted in the writing of fiction if he were not also a fine novelist, I should point out.)

I'd like to turn for a moment to the matter of Lem's reception in English-speaking SF circles, and to some of the larger issues I mentioned earlier. Writers like Blish and LeGuin, Sturgeon and Russ have shown an intelligent appreciation, even in critical discussions. Others, equally prominent, have dismissed his work with what seems to me an inattentive contempt, or have tried to make him out to be some kind of dogmatic theorist intellectual surrounded by foolish idolaters. (And this when even a modest beginner here tends to receive constant overpraise.) All the adverse reactions are hopelessly vague upon examination, while the more interested reactions might, I'm convinced, help produce the kind of re-examination of SF that all may profit from.

Sadly, there is an undercurrent of anti-intellectualism (some of it scarcely intentional) running through SF in the West. "Essays are not fiction," we are told, "therefore keep concepts simple, content minimal in your story." Writers pick up this attitude in their early years, in the same way they learn to sunder thinking and feeling, and ideas from human character. But what are ideas — where are they found? The answer is that *people* have ideas. Characters think them, say them, write them, *live* them at *all* levels of clarity as well as confusion. It is not everything they do, but it's enough for the SF writer's difficulties. While it takes great self-assurance, knowledge and writing talent to practice ideas in fiction and make a seamless fabric out of the effort, the problem here is that too many writers have never gotten over the feeling that it is always a case of *slipping the ideas in past the reader.* (More often, I think, the writer is whistling in the dark, his head full of half-heard thoughts which must serve in place of genuine, original speculation. I mean, who would go and study half a dozen different fields, the philosophy of science and logic,

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even be on speaking terms with the general movement of intellectual life, just to write SF?)

To be fair, much of the reaction against thinking and content is a legitimate reaction against gadgetry and Gernsback's minimal fiction — the popular science or engineering article thinly coated. (But it's surprising to see how many SF writers actually think they are carrying on high level reasoning and inquiry, when in truth their efforts are sophomoric and ignorant.) The proper response should have been to keep the habit of thought and throw out the bad fiction. Characters in SF stories often show impatience with philosophizing (by that word I mean rigorous, critical reasoning); problematic areas in science and other subjects are treated superficially, when there is a wealth of intriguing questions to be asked. Story explanations are a junk-heap of inconsistencies and simple-minded problems. Only Blish has said that we should try to speculate seriously in areas where little is known, with a view to the possibility that we *might* have something to contribute. The plausible unknown in a story does not have to be real, or turn out to be real; but it should be set in an intellectual context, consciously held, the kind of informed effort that adds verisimilitude to the story. The art of the serious *fictional* SF projection (distinct from Futurology of a purely intellectual sort) requires the sense for where to leave off explaining and where to bring in data and reasoning about what we know. Most SF writers know too little about the known, and explain enough about the unknown to hang themselves.

The anti-intellectualism I've described in SF is perhaps a small example of a larger omission. Our ideals are poor—the kind of person writing SF should not be one who is easily affected by the humanistic cynicism about science and philosophy, and technology that permeates the culture at large. The goals of SF writers are poor, the expectations of editors poorer. Writing talent, and its infrequent demonstration at that, is lauded all by itself, too much and too soon, like the praise given the tailor who made well cut suits, truly marvelous productions, out of burlap.

American SF was quick to see the myopia of the so-called new wave of the 1960's; but it has been blind to its own failings, seeing only the vague need for better *writing*. Lem's reception, the whisperings about intellectuals and primitive approaches, has more than a trace of blind, suspicious smugness in it — the desire to perpetuate the rarely challenged myth of the hegemony of SF written in English,

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the charge that Lem is a doctrinaire critic of Western SF. A non-doctrinaire critic would be one who had no assumptions at all—and nothing worth saying. This kind of statement is simply a naked confession of disagreement. There is no discussion about the validity of Lem's arguments, which might have led to a fruitful dialogue. Lem articulates what he means explicitly, systematically, where others speak off the top of their heads (with suppressed assumptions), unaware that they are not even voicing their own thoughts (thoughts which have been examined and worked into defensible form). A label is the equivalent of kicking the board over when the other side has made a strong move. It's easier than bettering the move.

But the most embarrassing part of Lem's reception is the fact that as I write only two of his novels, *Memoirs*, and *The Cyberiad* (both from Seabury) have been translated from the original language. Both of these are elegant translations, and should set the standard, as Lem himself has approved them. *The Invincible* is a translation from the German. The translator does the Perry Rhodan series, and too often the English is just as ugly as in that pulpy series-without-end. I am almost moved to do my own translation from the original and donate it to the publisher.

And yet...the novel in all its feeling and power manages to come through with an effect not unlike the original. Even this version will not disappoint readers. *Memoirs*, on the other hand, with its humor and farce, will appeal to a much wider audience. Anyone who enjoyed Nabokov's *The Waltz Invention* (a play), will find Lem's book a comparable treat.

The next wave, then, is European and non-English SF. Seabury's program also includes French author Stefan Wul's *Temple of The Past, Hard To Be A God* by the Russian team of Arkadi and Boris Sturgatskik, Franz Rottensteiner's European sampler of short fiction, *View From Another Shore* (which includes a long story by Lem). The next decade's non-English challenge to SF as we know it will be a significant one. I predict (and it doesn't take much to make it), because of the directions it suggests for global SF (I'll sum these up in a moment); but more importantly, we may at last be on the way toward a truly international form of SF.

It has been said that those who write beautifully in science fiction can't think, or don't; while those who think their concepts through often can't write fiction very well, or don't try for a high enough quality. Each group tends to be defensive, fighting the battle that

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even many humanists and scientists of the two-cultures fracas no longer wage: each group passes over the qualities of the other with a dead gaze. The insular chauvinism of the word-image artists, as well as the patronizing smile of those thinkers who are deaf to the complex demands of fiction and art, represents the kind of subtle philistinism-by-degrees which we must leave behind in science fiction. This is what is wrong. There can no longer be any excuse, especially among the younger writers. The thinking end of SF and its feeling end must work together.

How? By broadening the variety of human characters and cultures, the range of human interests, hopes and fears to be depicted in stories. If ideas and thinking are to be presented, then characters to whom this is natural must be shown in depth; but first it must be natural to the writer. All ideas are contained in persons. Ideas conflict through persons. There are no disembodied ideas, only individuals who hold an infinity of permutations. People are their ideas; and the separation of reason from the emotions is only a relative matter. Divisions such as those to be found in the previous sentence just do not exist in experience. No longer will it be necessary for James Blish to preface a book of his with comments titled, "A Critical Preface: To Be Skipped by Friends of Fiction," because ideas involving physics and philosophy are present in it. Fiction about whole people does not need this kind of apology to commericalism. *The Invincible* and *Solaris* contain profoundly rich ideas set naturally in the painful interiors of human beings; and the novels are entertaining also.

We shall have novelistic SF of high sophistication, unafraid to take its readers along into difficult subjects which demand thought, adult emotional responses and a serious curiosity about the *experiences* to be found in possible alternate futures. Few writers of SF have tried this difficult way (where one has to know things, think and write well). Lem's novels, with their vast erudition and thought, novelistic elegance, point the way through. All these last two decades, SF has had its major intellectual heir to Wells and Stapledon, and few of us knew it.

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From Larry Tritten: "The day I got your note I also received a letter from *National Review* accepting my Norman Mailer parody and news from *Gallery* that they would like to run a Pauline Kael parody I sent them. Perhaps I should consider becoming a mimic . . ."

The Star Sneak

a Jack Vance Parody

by LARRY TRITTEN

Learning of rumors to the effect that Vulgare Hokum had undertaken certain mercantile enterprises among the highland folk to the east of the city of Astropolis, on Tristan, Garth Curson chartered a star vessel and hurried to the planet. His errand: observance of his vow to enact vengeance upon each of the five Demon Pranksters who had ventured the temerity to address him in colloquial terms — one of whom was Vulgare Hokum.

Curson landed at the Astropolis Spaceport, from which he immediately repaired to seek lodging in a nearby hostel, a melancholic five-story structure of uremic yellow planking and gravy-colored stone. Along the walls of the great lobby, displayed in glass cases, were the bones and preserved pelts and derma of guests who had failed to recompense their accounts. Curson observed these for some time and then, making a meticulous count of his funds, withdrew to the dining hall. The menu offered a single fude Tristanese meal — an acrid salad of native herbage, a steamed and sugared musk frog, and a pannikin of spiced broth — yet Curson's appetite was large and he ate with relish, doing his best to ignore the itinerant evangelist who practiced devotional tumbling under his table. At length, he summoned a barrow and was jounced through the sinister back alleys of Astropolis to the native bazaar, where he intended to procure banes and balms to protect him on his trek to the highlands.

CHAPTER TWO

Curson found the repertorium he sought, a sturdy shed of russet thatch and umber lumber, and entered. Within, in the tremulous light of a single candle flickering in a carved stone flambeau, a man

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whose cheeks were tatooed with talismanic graffiti stood behind a counter.

Curson made a debonair gesture. "I wish to examine effectuants to insure me against brigandage on a journey into perilous regions."

"Excellent!" exclaimed the keeper, and began to bring forth articles. "What do you seek? This spendid poison, perhaps!" He exhibited a coarse-textured purple powder. "When introduced into the food or drink of an enemy, it causes instant death by implosion of the vital organs. Or — here: this useful toxin compels its victim to walk askew, as though he were the wearer of uncomfortably tight underlinen. The result is obloquy! A related substance induces constant vulgar eructation, a certain woe to all who enjoy convivial discourse. What else can I recommend? Ah, this! An amulet which reverses natural dispositions. Observe!" And the keeper displayed a cage containing a brooding hyena, a sloth with a nervous condition, and a ground-rodent which was said to be claustrophobic.

Curson shrugged. "None of these items seem to be exactly what I seek."

"And yet," replied the keeper, frowning gravely, "I must caution you to purchase all. I am prepared to waft *tox mephis* at you, a potion which will distort the lucidity of your speech, causing you to express yourself in slang and monosyllables!"

Curson made his purchases and departed hastily.

CHAPTER THREE

At dawn Curson joined a company of pilgrims who were bound east toward the highlands. All day the pilgrims marched along the river Zag, singing raffish songs, engaging in affable chatter and badinage, and playfully thrusting one another into bogs. In the dying afternoon an armada of thunderclouds edged with wan light sailed across the darkening sky, threatening deluge.

Shelter was sought in a cave. Here sobriety replaced casual banter, and discussions of a metaphysical and philosophical tone ensued.

One called Fragon, an extreme cynic, professed a unique cosmology: he maintained that the celestial bodies were ordure produced by a great deity, offering in conclusion: "...and, as it is well known that a variety of vermin spawns in such matter, thus were the races of the universe born."

"This is impiety!" retorted Hakule, a tall muscular man with flashing eyes like black gems.

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"Such a creed makes jest of the Divine Artificer. In accordance with the teachings of the holy sage Whilom, I attest the doctrine which fully acknowledges the essential nature of our Creator — sweetness: the heavenly spheres are various sorts of comfits, bonbons, and the like, the work of a Cosmic Confectioner. The races of the universe are analogous to animalculae partaking sustenance."

"Bah!" cried another cynic. "If anything, the cosmos is the effect of a deity who specializes in the art of caricature. How else explain the sorry state of things in relation to what they might ideally be?"

At length, Curson was called upon to expound his own creed. He chose to do so by object lesson, producing a small knife and easing the pilgrims of their valuables, then slipping quickly from the cave to continue his journey alone.

CHAPTER FOUR

The following day Curson toiled to the crest of a high barren hill where he crouched behind the jutting bulk of a large crag, gazing down at the terrain far below: the entire valley was filled with orchards of gray-brown pod-bearing stalks, thousand upon thousands of them, stretching far away over a series of rolling hillocks into the blue-hazed regions of the north. Even as Curson watched, a large aggregation of harvesters appeared and began picking the pods; these harvesters were a motley throng — outworlders all: there were obese, omnivorous anthropoids from Viand, clad in edible tunics and pantaloons ... Capellan bird-fellows, now fluttering, now stepping ... complaisant automatons from Mao's Planet, Earthmen, Alderbaranese like orange stucco gorillas, others of all shapes and origins.

Interplanetary *braceros,* thought Curson. So these were Vulgare Hokum's employees! But what was the nature of the enterprise? And where might Vulgare Hokum himself be found?

The sun was a wound, the horizon to the west a blood-drenched swath by the time Curson had descended from the heights. Disguised in a monk's hooded cloak, he approached a harvester, a solemn, industrious Earthman working alone at the edge of one of the orchards. When near enough for contact, he flourished his knife and pressed it to the man's collarbone.

"Satisfy my queries, or I carve expletives on your visage!" snapped Curson. "First, state where Vulgare Hokum may be found — then explain the import of these pods!"

The man blanched with fear, evinced a gasp of supplication. "Forbear! Candor is my ethic!

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Vulgare Hokum may be sought yonder —" he pointed a trembling finger vigorously "—in his office-shed. As for the pods, these are to be gathered, dried, cured and shipped to a cereal manufactory in Battle Creek, Michigan, at which point they will be processed and converted into flakes to be packaged with charms and sold as a breakfast treat known as *Polykrisps.* The aim of the undertaking is thus: the plant has a narcotic effect, and Vulgare Hokum intends to distribute samples, addict the galaxy, and administer a reign of ribaldry."

Curson pondered the explanation for a moment, then nodded slowly. "I give you your life," he murmured, and struck the man unconscious with the haft of his blade.

CHAPTER FIVE

Now the moment of denouement was at hand. Curson strode to the door of Vulgare Hokum's office-shed, turned the knob, pushed, and sprang inside with a loud cry. Vulgare Hokum, aghast, lurched to his feet behind a metal desk, dropping a small bouquet of stimulative blooms he had been sniffing; he stood transfixed, a lank, full-bearded rogue attired all in black — a tailored suit and a stylish cape emblazoned with the emblem of an ancient epicurean cult; profiled head of white hare with bow tie.

Curson raised an admonitory finger. "Now you must answer for your peccancies, villain!"

"What th' hell's peccancy?" came the surly retort; then, "You ain't gettin' me! I'm gettin' out—" In midsentence, Vulgare Hokum primed himself, made a dramatic leap for a nearby window; but Curson was upon him at once, knife flashing. There was a brisk scuffle, a violent embrace and falling away.

Before he drew his last breath, Vulgare Hokum, prostrate on the floor, grimacing sourly, addressed a fusillade of Pig Latin at Curson.

Then Curson left to assume his new role as entrepreneur and supervise the harvesting of his pods.

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This story involves only a minor extrapolation from the present, yet the changes in the lives and attitudes of its extraordinary characters are profound enough to render it into a superior example of speculative fiction.

Under Siege

by ROBERT THURSTON

1. The Rape

A muscular black with a kind face held me back. I pushed against him, forcefully, but with the resignation of a wrestler who already knows the countermove, and he gently pinned me to the side of the building. While the other flunkies held Grace down on the sidewalk, The Man took off his expensive camel's-hair coat (when *exactly* did they adopt the gangster image, at just what point in their continuing guerrilla warfare?). He stared at me, smiling — a hard, straight smile, the fireplace poker including the hook at one end.

Grace did not move. She knew better than to resist. They might have welcomed the slightest chance to add assault to rape. I hollered to a passer-by for help. He used body language on me, a formalized touching of the eye corner to signify sympathy, timed with a shrug of what can you expect from me.

A flunkie moved sideways, and suddenly I could see Grace's face. I made another token attempt to free myself from my guard, and she smiled. In that smile were all the years, our whole life of fear. We had accepted fear as the unspoken command in the marriage ceremony, to love and to fear. But in the early days it was different, we knew what we were getting into. A white man marries a black woman, he puts up with all the varieties of glance and stare that the human face can form, from curiosity to envy to hatred. The *white* human face. I wove the message, "fuck you," into my own face and it became easier. I could walk through crowds holding Grace as close as possible. There were some fights — in bars, on streetcorners, even at a literary cocktail party — but most of the struggle consisted of battles against vocal shadings

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and the kind of facial expression which attacked indirectly. Eventually we found a suitable number of safe places where people accepted us.

But now — after civil rights and riots and killing and the emerging brand of law-and-order fascism disguising itself in the rhetorical garments of its opponents — now the white faces did not matter. Now the black faces stared with hatred, the black people made the insulting remarks. Grace had become the traitor; the noble savages had changed to savage nobles, and they meted out their own kinds of justice for treason.

The Man, the leader, looked over at me before descending onto Grace. Pity in that look, but magisterial in intent; he did not consider me a person at all. He seemed quite regal in his carefully tailored green slave trousers, his lapelless green jacket. His face reminded me of history, of the proud African fighters which the white race had tried to civilize through emasculation. This man was a throwback to greater days. He had the high cheekbones of a tribesman, the steady gaze of a spear-throwing warrior. His large hands untied the rope around his trousers, then he lowered and stepped out of them in one smooth motion, making this normally awkward act seem stylized, almost tribal. Then he was on top of Grace, entering her, and I looked away. Involuntarily I flashed a jungle attack, striped Zulus swinging out of trees. I flashed the darkie picture of Grace: it was from an illustration in one of my grandfather's ancient books, a line drawing of a little pickaninny-type at play. This picture came to my mind much too often, and each time I despised myself for thinking of it. I hated seeing Grace in the context of a racist drawing over a century old.

My guard took my head by the jaw and gave it a quarter turn. He wanted me to watch the rape. I saw The Man pump, saw the all-too-human conspiratorial smiles of the flunkies who cheered him on. For a moment I cursed myself for endowing the rapist with symbolic imagery. This was, I thought, merely the animal act of the treacherous human beast whom the other animals gave a wide berth because he had assimilated the logic of cruelty. Then I told myself to stop searching for analogies. To stop thinking altogether. I wanted to scream out irrationally and demolish my attackers with a burst of hysterical strength. I hated thinking, *interpreting* what I saw, yet I could not rid myself of the habit. I could not release myself to the emotion of any moment. No matter what happened to me or

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around me, I could always pull out of the catalog some interpretation of the event. My feelings at that moment were, nevertheless, analyzable. Stupidly I flashed all the meanings, put them down like a set of multiple-choice answers. But I looked the part of the hysterical victim, I knew that. Nobody could see my mind clicking. I could not let outsiders know the control I had over myself.

"You are *always* a soul sister, remember that," The Man said afterwards. Grace nodded. Always agree, she'd always told me — agreeing with a man acts faster than any sedative.

Finally a policeman somewhere, who had probably been watching from a safe window, blew a whistle. The attackers reacted as if to a prearranged signal, and scattered. I helped Grace up and we split, not willing to endure police hatred, the official condescension, the club-footed investigation, the final warning — said or unsaid — that if you traffic with blacks in any way, especially marriage, you have forfeited your right to aid from the legally constituted authorities. I had already spent too much time with pigs who thought my name was sufficient excuse to bring out their special fillips, to exercise neglected psychological techniques.

At home we both cried. And later we laughed for we both read Greek tragedy, knew the laughable pathos of Fate-derived irony. We cried and laughed at our own little tragedy: The Birth Control Act would take effect in a week. For the first seven years of our marriage we had postponed having a child, feeling that we wanted to be economically and emotionally ready to become parents. Then our honorable lawmakers, befuddled by the different motivated demands of the reactionaries and the ecologists, passed the Birth Control Act as a palliative measure. The Act was a legislative horror, a bizarre amalgamation of genuinely progressive innovations and repulsive strictures which had been inserted to use population control as a lawful method of fettering certain types of social deviates, like Grace and me. During the six-month interim period before the Act became law, we had tried unsuccessfully to conceive a child. We knew that, once the law took effect, there was no chance we would be granted a license for parenthood. The radical writer and his black baby? No way, man, no way. These days they would give us trouble if we — together — applied for a dog license.

After a term of pacing and clock-watching, Grace retired without a word to the bathroom, where she bit the pregnancy-test paper, the ritual she had so

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faithfully performed for us when the prescribed time after intercourse had passed, and we waited the agonizing interval, and the test showed positive, and we cried. Then the laughter because it was Fate and we could respond to the joke.

2. The Article

We opted for the abortion. The *patriotic* solution, as the subway signs called it. I could not be generous and bravely bring up another man's child merely to satisfy that longing to have a kid around the house. I sensed that Grace's reasons for agreeing to the abortion were more complex, but each time I tried to evaluate them I ended in a muddle of contradictions.

So we had the abortion performed in a hygenically impressive doctor's office, and the Birth Control Act went into effect, and our polite, predictable bureaucrat refused us a spot on the waiting list without involving himself, and I wrote the article because writing articles is the only way I have of exorcising demons.

New York, of course, agreed to publish it. I think they suspected that their magazine would soon be murdered, and so they published whatever any of us wrote. They were like a falling man trying to work up saliva to spit at his killer. The notorious Mailer piece came the week after mine, and the obituaries went out for *New York*.

In the midst of the controversy, my article was barely noticed, perhaps fittingly since it was a tired piece of work. As tired as I was when I wrote it. It was in the form of an open letter to the rapist, The Man, as I so ironically preferred to call him.

Conclusion of the article went something like this (I can't be exact because I've misplaced the carbon and Grace, always safety-minded, destroyed all our *New Yorks* when the ax fell):

"All the above justifications of your act are merely, and you must understand this, *justifications*. I do not forgive you. You are The Man, and you are condemned to living out your life according to its symbolic parameters. I am not your white liberal trying to disguise my racism. (Do I have to scream that, write it on clouds, bring tablets down from the mountain?) When I said that your color makes no difference, I meant it. I was not even thinking of your color when I wrote it. You are The Man and are worse off than any of us. You deal in justice, a wheeling-dealing profession if there ever was one, and may ignore the consequences of your act, throw the robes on the coatrack and walk out of the

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courthouse. I will not forgive you or any other of my enemies. Even though I am writing this to you, you are not special, not singled out for the small portion of my life that you have wrecked. Demolished. I reject you as I reject all my enslavers. They are The Man, too."

I received the usual mail, the disguised sympathy cards and the you - got - what - you - deserve - niggerlover hate messages. But I felt the article was wrong. It expiated nothing. In every part of our apartment I flashed things I might have done with my child.

3. The Man Appears

On the other side of the locked glass door of our apartment house. He had rung the buzzer. We lived on the first floor, and so Grace went out to see who it was. I ran to the hallway when she screamed.

He just stood there, relaxed, his face devoid of readable expression, his hands in his pockets. A marvelous pose for a fashion ad. Grace edged close to me and said:

"What should we do, Ben? He may intend to kill us."

"He can't get in. The glass is impregnable, the door triple-locked."

"He can get in if he wants to."

The three of us made a pretty tableau, *A Study in Mindless Fear*, for two minutes at least.

"Damn, I'll have to call the cops," I finally said. I hated the idea, pigs in my own home, traces of them around for weeks afterward. However, I kept no gun, and was afraid to hold anything that might become a weapon. (My fear of guns surprises anyone who knows my history of brawls — but in fights my fists were the weapon, and they could be controlled.) As I dialed, Grace collected our dope supply and rushed back to the hallway to stash it in our hiding place. After two rings, an answer: very polite voice, insurance-executive toniness. I stammered. Grace came back into the room.

"He's gone."

The policeman asked what I wanted.

"Eat shit, copper," I said in my James Cagney voice and slammed down the receiver.

The Man showed up next at a supermarket. Grace was standing in line, her basket of lifeless foodstuffs in front of her, when he touched her shoulder and whispered:

"Tell him I read the article."

He might have said more, but Grace started screaming. The other customers, mostly whites, made no move to help. They enjoyed the phenomenon of one black showing revulsion for another. The Man strode out of the store, kicking over a Seven-Up display as he went.

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When she came home, Grace demanded that we get out of the city.

"At least for a while. Long enough for him to get tired hanging around. He's got a mean on, and I'm frightened out of my wits what he might be planning."

I had to agree. I'd been in the city too long as it was, seen too much develop. I tried to maintain some hope for the underground elements and the as-yet-unsilenced public figures who fought against each of the "temporary" law - and - order measures, but as time passed I could not avoid a fear that the expected resurgence of humane values would not, after all, take place. At least, not for a long while. I felt as if the steel walls were already built, that they were stringing barbed wire across the top. It was time to get out, before they thought of requiring licenses to travel. I sublet the apartment (easy, always somebody around who liked to make a renowned writer's pad their total conversation piece). As we passed through the main toll booth, I tried to feel a sense of relief, but I kept looking at the rearview mirror to see if The Man was sitting in the back seat.

During the trip, cops stopped us at least five times. Harassing Ben Raydon and his black wife was becoming a national pastime.

4. The Farm

My birthplace, in the family three generations, kept by me in benign neglect because I could not accept the burden of selling it. Traces of my father and grandfather everywhere. Photographs in brown tones, others in posed close-up. The Raydon men standing too straight, as if caught at the exact moment an arrow entered their backs, the Raydon women all folded up in neat bundles. The library with the fancy-binding books (in one of them, the racist drawing of Grace). The sunken cushions of favorite chairs. The old eight-band radio that never played for me. The framed newspaper photo of FDR in a car with Churchill. The sheet music on the piano, some copies with my dad's, smudged thumbprint in a lower corner.

The first day, Grace walked through the rooms as if the family's strained politeness still existed there for her, something she could touch. The massive rooms and the high ceilings made me feel small again, a kid ready to tear down the walls in one catastrophic run through the house. Eventually we dispersed the illusions — opened the windows, let the old air out, new air in. We deliberately rearranged the furniture, moved pictures from room to room, went into town and

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bought some new carpeting. I sat at the piano and sang my version of "Amazing Grace" to her as she worked. She laughed, and the ghosts knew they were beaten.

People in the nearby town, my hometown, were not especially happy with us. They resented my books, which they did not allow placed in the library that my grandfather had helped build; they resented my public image as it used to be displayed on television, and they resented Grace. But racially they *had* advanced past the Pleistocene Era, and so they tolerated us. We made a couple of friends among the small black community but found we had survived too long to sit by as observers of their comfortable despair. I tried to talk them into going to a big city, where they were needed, but they were logical people, sad black liberals, who saw no use for violence and no hope for nonviolence.

I idled away time, making up silly metaphors for our historical predicament. Hanging, glued to a severed piece of the spider web of time. Sinking in the quicksand of a pothole on the expressway of life. Ass sticking through the headhole of the falling guillotine of years. Wandering through the wasteland of now looking for our lost petard. I covered a sheet of yellow paper with them, then fed it to the fire.

We watched some TV, but could not bear the news. Could not watch the new combinations of violence, the glazed looks of good people who either did not know what was happening or knew only too well, the hop-skip-jump leaps of smug politicians over the line to what one of the braver commentators (PBS, doomed) termed "the 'temporary' police state." I could not keep from screaming at the news.

"Well, at least around here you are a *genuine* voice in the wilderness," Grace said.

5. The Man Reappears

Standing in front, leaning against a battered green Mustang. Carved face, immobile. (A flash of him standing by an old Model A, his feet on the running board, Tommy gun at his side.) Grace was asleep. I knew enough not to wake her. I dressed and tiptoed downstairs. At a landing I heard the growling of a car starting up. When I stepped onto the porch, the car was gone. I ran to where it had stood, praying that it had been an apparition. But the tire tracks in the dirt road were real and fresh, and the cloud on the horizon was dust.

I couldn't tell Grace. In my mind I saw the terror come into her face a hundred times, I could see all

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the lines and shadows, but I couldn't bear seeing it for real.

I thought of calling the town police, but I knew the sheriff, an old high-school classmate. He used to copy answers from me. He mentions that every time we meet. I can't allow him solace now.

We could not return to the city; we should not stay at the farm. Deprived of choice, we could only hang droop-shouldered and cross-legged waiting for a string to be pulled.

He did not return until evening. He drove the car slowly up the road, lights out. First I heard the sound of the motor. I glanced at Grace. She was reading, sitting in my father's old chair (her little black ass in your favorite chair, Dad, wouldn't that have made your neck swell?). She looked up. Interpreting my gaze as one of our regular love messages, she smiled and returned to her book. I sidled over to a window and looked out. It was hard to see anything, the night was so dark. I thought I saw the car parked the same place as before. I muttered something about needing some air, and Grace mumbled something back. I went out onto the porch, but stood by the door waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. There was mist or smog (you never know which any more) in the air, and so nothing would come clear. I could see the shapes of all the debris that had collected in the front yard over many years. Iron lawn furniture, an ancient wheelless carriage my father had salvaged from an auction and then allowed to decay while he tried to figure out what to do with it, odds and ends of junk that I'd thrown there during my brief occupancies of the farm. Now my memory was affected, and I could not tell what was what, or which crouching shadow might be The Man. I advanced to the porch steps, squinted for a better view. Nothing. I began to wonder if I'd really heard the car, but the Mustang-like shape still seemed parked where I'd originally seen it. I felt that I must at least verify its presence and chance walking across the yard. He had us trapped anyway, and I had to know more before I could work up the nerve to tell Grace of his presence. (All right, I admit that I'm not a rational coward, that possibly I should have reversed myself, stayed the hell out of the yard and raced in to warn Grace. You tell me what you did when you were actually confronted with danger, and we'll compare notes.) I began my walk in a kind of crouch, not so much the prowl of a cautious animal as the bodily reaction to all the unfelt pressures. I walked perhaps four steps when I heard a sound and stopped. The sound was rhythmic — a slow, easy tempo.

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Feet against gravel, but not walking, running, or leaping. No, just feet in place. Dancing, maybe shuffling. I could've hummed any number of tunes to it. I went a few more steps into the yard, slightly toward the sound. My foot grazed a piece of junk. I knelt down and picked it up. It felt like some kind of auto part, maybe one of the pieces my brother had left behind. It was too thick and heavy, a blow from it could kill. I dropped it. He must have heard that, for the shuffle like sound stopped.

"What is it?" I said, low, trying to keep my voice down so that Grace would not hear.

No answer. My nervousness increased. The shuffling sound had given me some sureness before. My terror made me remember that I'd left behind a perfectly good flashlight in a kitchen drawer.

"Man, I don't want to play Kafka games with you. What do you want?" No answer. "Look man, I'm willing to discuss anything with you. If it's more violence you want, then start. If you want to try to punish me for some crime you've imagined I've done you, then start. If you just want a good brawl to relieve one or both of us from our sins, then start. But let's quit the coy sneaking around, huh?" No answer. "I admire your cool. I really do. You're implacable, like an Inquisition judge. I can dig that, I can almost see it as proper the way things are now. Okay, you've got to make all your judgments on the basis of sin; there's no room for leavening mercy, no room — hell, what am I doing? — out here in the dark trying to cope with the metaphysics of the situation! I don't know if you understand anything of what I'm saying —"

"I understand every word," he said. *"Every."*

The voice came from a point about 90 degrees from where I'd heard the shuffle, toward the Mustang. It was a soft voice, with the scratchy sound of an after-midnight deejay. I said a few more things to him, but he reverted to the silent state. Since he now stood between me and the car, and since talking was getting me nowhere, I decided to go back to the house. The night, the mist, and The Man's eerie silence were all unnerving me. I turned around and tried to take the walk back to the house at a normal pace, but my back muscles tightened at odd sounds. As I reached the steps, I could hear him chuckling quietly.

When I entered the house, I found Grace standing by the door.

"What's going on out there?"

"Nothing."

"I know nothing when I see it."

She followed me into the kitchen.

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"What was out there?"

"I don't know, too dark to see."

"Don't back out by using the literal truth. It's him, isn't it?"

"Seems so."

I told her about both the morning and evening visits.

"But why is he haunting us?"

"I don't know. Talking's not one of his favorite hobbies."

I grabbed the flashlight from its drawer and took it to the front porch. Relatively calm, Grace stood behind me as I shone the light around the yard. Both The Man and the car were gone. I spent the next few hours talking with Grace, trying to decide whether I had really seen The Man, or whether I was having some sort of paranoid hallucination.

The discussion proved futile. When we came downstairs the next morning, we found him sleeping on the living room couch.

6. The Siege

All day he helped around the house. He was so fastidious, he made me nervous. He got rid of dust that neither Grace nor I would have bothered with, dust which had actually enhanced the decor. After breakfast and lunch he collected the dishes and washed them, taking a dishtowel away from Grace and shooing her out of the kitchen. Dinner he prepared entirely, a light omelet with a strangely sweet piquant sauce.

He would not talk to me, nor would he allow a meaningful expression to cross his face. When I tried to talk to him, he gave no response, except that he would turn his head my way, obviously listening.

That night, in the kitchen, he initiated a conversation with Grace. I heard them talking but knew better than to interfere in any way.

After sunset there was a sudden drop in temperature. As always, the cold seeped into the house. I started to pile logs for a fire, but The Man gently pushed me away, then built a perfect fire himself. We all sat before the roaring flames, a bit awkwardly — The Man staring at the fire, Grace and I looking at each other and at him.

"Nothing like a night in the country to form ice around your joints," I said, a failed attempt to make conversation. Reaching for a new tack: "Sure wish I'd brought some dope here with me; that'd take the edge off a night like this."

Without a hint of friendliness or warmth, The Man strode over to the closet and extracted from his coat pocket a baggie filled with marijuana. With cool efficiency he packed a small pipe with it and handed it to me. Making some forgettable astonished remark, I took it and lit up. We spent the rest

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of the evening watching visions in the fire.

Later, when the stuff had worn off and we were alone in bed, I asked Grace what her little talk with The Man had been about.

"Not much," she said. "A little disjointed, actually. Stories of his life in the ghetto. Incidents, small things that turned his stomach, set him off against not only whites but anybody who stood in his way. There was a sort of theme running through it all. Anytime anybody takes a swipe at him, he pays back — in double if possible. In most of the stories he told me he was avenging himself on somebody who'd harmed him, directly or indirectly."

"Like me now, maybe. But I really can't understand why. I mean, he raped you, he wrecked our chances for parenthood, what more does he think he's got to do to us, and why?"

"I don't know. This afternoon I almost knew, I almost heard it in his voice and saw it in his eyes, but he has this astonishing way of throwing you off the track."

"Yes, hasn't he?" I said, pressing my head into my pillow. "But at least he's got an in for some good grass, and *that's* pretty rare nowadays."

The next day I resolved to break through to him, to attempt to discover why he had assigned himself the position as our personal ghost. I tried first my own analysis of racism, quoting bits of my *Commentary* article, and I watched him carefully for any kind of response to any particular point — historical, political, sociological, or otherwise. I suppose I thought I could impress him with my grasp of the vicissitudes of the American black experience. He listened as he kept himself busy arranging books in my father's library. Most of the time his head was tilted at an angle, in my direction. But his face remained a blank — no agreement, disagreement, no emotional response of any kind. Although I began calmly, deliberately choosing my professional voice, I ended frustrated, in a near rage. As always happens when I get angry, I used the karate chop gesture — both hands raised up threateningly, then down with force to emphasize my argument — and I repeated the same points as repetitiously as the karate gesture. When I gave up and stormed out of the room, he was as cool as when we'd started. He had just finished arranging our ancient set of *Book of Knowledge* into the correct order.

After lunch I stayed in the kitchen while he did dishes. Grace retreated. This time I zeroed in on him, moving from the general to the specific. My intention was to see the rape through his eyes. I

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dramatized what I believed went through his mind, his disgust at Grace for crossing over. As I played his part, I saw what he must have seen. The assurance in Grace's movements that showed most of all how she had settled into another world — how she walked easily, and without a sense of inferiority, through intellectual and upper-class milieus. In her eyes the self-confidence of a woman who knew what the world was all about and how to exist in it nevertheless. A woman of such strength she could smile at a deep insult, but of such perspicacity she could handle most of the situations that came up. I told The Man how he must have felt looking down upon her passive body, how he must have hated her refusal to resist, how the rape had really *failed* because violent acts, even when carried through to a finish, are failures if they are too easy, if the victim responds with Grace's brand of defiant passivism.

As I embroidered the story, I rang in every emotion laden word at my command. I gave it such force that, by the end, I knew it was no longer at attempt at communication but an elaborate apologia in the form of drama. My voice was completely controlled, my gestures impeccably timed — all in all, a better show than I gave in my famous last appearance on the Cavett Show. But, for all The Man cared, I might as well have moved it to Off-Broadway and made some money with it. He was a rock, a statue, a moving pillar of salt, a Monogram Pictures zombie, an iron faced mechanical doll.

When I had slumped into a chair, waving the curtain down and awaiting the explosion of applause, he silently crossed the room and tightened the newel post on the stairway railing to the second floor. It was a Shakespearean move, the eloquence of Othello before his accusers. Tighten the newel post, and then tighten the newel post.

I couldn't stand it. My anger broke through the thin protective layer. I called him names — untainted, objective WASP names — in the fierce growl that had been my trademark in TV appearances, the uneven rumble that told the audience I was about to demolish some cretin who'd just voiced his philosophy of life in memorized quatrains. This time I told him how *I* suffered. I gave him the most chilling details of the follies of miscegenation, told him how I'd put down physically and verbally the cruelest boors on the Eastern seaboard, told him of the enviable kind of life Grace and I had built together, told him what I felt as I watched him stick his ironically fertile tool into Grace, told him how I really felt at the moment I knew that I would never have a child

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because of his cruel and irrelevant act of social protest. As I drove home the points, he slowly walked closer — still listening, still impassive. He came close enough to grab, to kick, and I nearly could not resist the impulse to smash him. When, afraid of tears, I stopped, he stood there a moment longer, then walked past me into the kitchen. I think a small chuckle escaped from him as he went through the door.

I stayed in the chair, an actor who had flopped before the play finished.

In the kitchen he talked again with Grace. He mentioned nothing of what I'd said to him. Which I resented. As she told me later, he was his usual self, semicoherent but intelligent.

"He uses the words," she said, "the same ones your set uses. But from him they don't always mean anything. Or seem to, anyway."

"What words, an example?"

"Good, fashionable stuff. Disoriented — actually he said 'disorientated,' all us soul brothers and sisters do, y'know — but I couldn't tell in just what context he was disorientated. Context, that was another one, but what the hell context, I don't know. He said a lot about norms, but sometimes, this is silly, he might as well have been talking about some friend named Norman. That sort of thing, but he didn't make much sense until the end."

"What happened then?"

"First he said he was sorry, and I waited a long time before he'd specify what he was sorry about. Then it was clear that he meant the rape. I asked him if he was sorry about me or us or the child, and, instead of answering, he got on the subject of the child. 'What a kid he would've been,' he kept saying, 'what a eyeball-popping, jiving, militant little bastard he would've been.' He described him as if he could see him, as if he'd already spent a lot of time figuring what he'd look like."

"Sick..."

"I don't know. It's all in the game, honey. I doubt he's sick. His eyes, well, they just don't look insane, or even very emotional, when he spoke. And he talked so calmly..."

"Doesn't he always?"

"But it's a rational calm, I think."

"Can you be *that* sure?"

"Reasonably. I wish I could explain, but I *can* tell. It's something between us, something —"

"Blacks can share alone, but which is somehow *above* my limits of understanding."

"God damn it, if you're going to be sarcastic, yes. Right. Exactly. Yeah. Sho'nuff, honeychile."

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We lay silent for a long time, each savoring the feeling of an anger so rare between us. Finally she said abruptly:

"He asked me to go away with him."

"Son of a bitch!"

"Knew you'd say that. Don't worry, I turned him down. I told him I derived great enjoyment from being a martyr to both sides of a cause. He seemed to understand that."

"I don't."

"If he were to kill me right now, I wouldn't just be a martyr in the strung-out tragedy of Black America — his side — but also to that part of America which struggles with its sins — your side. For that matter, I'd also be a symbolic victim of the violence of our emerging police state."

"Well, don't let him kill you. I couldn't stand the strain of planning out the tombstone."

"White man funny, but shove yo' wooden beads up yo' white ass."

In the morning, following him as he carried in fireplace logs, I told him that I capitulated.

"I refuse to try to make you understand," I said. "I refuse to understand you. Whatever the battle is, I am returning to the trenches; seek me there."

I thought he dropped an armful of logs a little faster than was absolutely necessary.

"Understand," I continued. "I should understand you? I have known Grace now — what, eleven, twelve years? — and I understand her as the woman I love, I understand her as someone who can cope with the word entanglements of a rather dense literary set, I understand her as a devoted wife who can't keep accounts, but I do not — and have never — understood her as a Black Woman. She hides that from me."

He seemed unimpressed.

I stormed out of the house, heading for town. At first I just wanted to walk off my anger, but before I crossed the village limits, I knew I was going to visit my old schoolchum, the sheriff. I found him protecting a cove of Wild Turkey at the local bar. Supplying him with the basic facts of the matter, I asked if there were anything legal I could do. Instead of answering, he stared at me, eyes squinted, as if he were looking inside my head, still seeking answers there he could copy.

"Try not to get mixed up in jigaboo problems," he said, "but I guess I might —"

"Jigaboo?"

"It's what I said. Something the matter?"

"No, just never heard the word before. I mean, I've seen it in print, but I don't remember anybody actually *using* it."

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"What I mean to say, is I guess I might do something, for you and all. Can get him on trespass, but that might not be satisfactory to you."

"Why not?"

"Well, not much we can do against trespass any more. We hope they pay the fine because we got no room for them in the jail. The judge don't even like the prospect of bothering with a misdemeanor — I could talk to him, though. Not much else I could do, unless you could maybe prove he's vandalizing your property or doing some other felonious act. Loitering's a misdemeanor, too."

"Never mind."

"He comes to town, I can bruise him if you want."

I left him, sorry that I'd come to him. I walked back to the farm, trying to think of some way I could rid myself of The Man. At the farm I found Grace on the porch steps, brooding. She said that he'd started in on her as soon as I'd left.

"Followed me around. Stood outside of the bathroom and bedroom doors, and shouted in at me. He called me all kinds of names, most of which reduced to accusations of treason."

"Traitor to your race."

"More than that. Traitor to humanity, to all the great moral values enshrined by man, to the universe itself. He said I'd always be a cipher if I continued as I am. He called me a black Establishment doll — pull my cord and I'll speak your language, *whatever* it is. He said a human life has value only in accordance with the number of other lives it serves — in some way, in any way. My life has no value on his scale."

"That's all he's got? Tired propaganda?"

"Yes, except —"

"Except what?"

"Except it's true. For me. I didn't think it was, but it is —"

"Grace —"

"Don't start it!"

"Start what?"

"*Your* propaganda."

I sat down beside her, too frustrated to defend myself. A few minutes later I heard the door open and shut behind me. I made a grunting sound which I hoped would convey a heavy load of sarcasm to him. He tapped me on the shoulder. I stiffened, I would not look at him. Suddenly there was a glass in front of my face, one of a set of tall green-tinted glasses which had been in the family for years. Uncomfortable at looking cross eyed at it, I took it from him. I stared at the top, at a long striped straw and two entwined sprigs of mint.

"What's this?"

Grace smiled.

"A mint julep, I think."

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"Son of a bitch," I said, and threw the glass into the yard. It landed, without breaking, on the floor of my father's wheelless carriage. Liquor rivulets began to flow down the side, streaking the rust. Grace laughed.

"What's so funny about that?"

"I wasn't exactly laughing at that."

"What exactly were you laughing at?"

"He didn't blink an eye, just did a little Stepin Fetchit turn and shuffle to the door."

"Son of a bitch."

After sitting still a moment longer, I arose quickly and practically tore the door off the hinges racing into the house. The Man stood calmly in the center of the room. I screamed at him that I'd had enough and wanted him to get the hell out. Maybe a flicker of amusement crossed his face. For a moment I was speechless; there were no more new ways to speak to him. I planted myself directly in front of him, looking up at him, and repeated my ultimatum. He made no move. I put my hands against his lapels and shoved — an easy shove, a testing shove to measure him. He did not resist, simply went back two steps. With a forward surge, I pushed harder, sending him off balance. He recoiled against the back of the couch, then regained his former position, straight and calm. Next I grabbed his lapels and, summoning up the best of my strength, slammed the big man against the nearest wall. A glimmer of pain in his eyes, followed by a wide, unmistakably Uncle Tom grin. I smiled back and pulled him away from the wall.

"Ben," Grace said. "Stop. That's enough."

"Not nearly," I said and pushed him against the wall again, this time half turning my body so that he could feel the brunt of a hard shoulder against his chest.

"Ben!" Grace implored. She stood directly behind me.

"No," I said, and raised my arm. I intended to break his jaw, but Grace grabbed my arm as I started the blow. There was too much force in my arm movement, and she could not hold on, but her action deflected my aim, and I missed his face entirely (he did not try to avoid the punch; there was no eye flicker, no change in the Uncle Tom grin). My fist hit and scraped against the wood wall, knocking splinters into my knuckles. I yowled, released my hold on him and backed away, pressing the back of my hand to my mouth. He straightened up but made no move in my direction. His face restored its usual enigmatic appearance. I turned to Grace.

"Good work," I said. "All

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feeling is seeping out of my hand."

She began nursing the injury, delicately pulling out splinters.

"I'm sorry, but —"

"Yeah, I know. Thanks."

The Man went into the downstairs bathroom, came out with a handful of material from the medicine cabinet. Working together, he and Grace applied healing creams, gauze, and surgical tape. He was as efficient as a hospital attendant. I tried to discover something in his eyes while he concentrated on the repair, but there was no evident concern or feeling.

Grace forced me into our bedroom to lie down. I tried to sleep but could not. I couldn't shut out the disturbed rumblings of a conversation taking place downstairs between Grace and The Man. It was annoying to hear the sounds without knowing what was being said. Was that a sob from Grace? What were the words of the long soliloquy, delivered in those eloquent guttural tones, in that voice which I had heard clearly only twice? Finally I could stand their remoteness no longer. I felt too much the outsider, excluded from the sharing of their blackness. Holding the knob tightly, so I could control its noise, I quietly opened the door and slipped out into the hallway. Walking like a sneak thief (which perhaps I was), I crossed to the landing, from which I could obtain a partial view of the immense living room. I could see Grace from the hips down, I could see his legs behind her. Grace was talking:

"It's a stupid solution, the wrong one."

Her voice was different; it had a bit of the street in its inflections. He mumbled something in answer to her.

"But I'll goddamn do it," she said. "Okay, shit, I'll do it. You go warm up the car, while I explain it to him —"

His hands slid around her hips and began, with massaging motions, defining a path toward her sex. He said, in any exaggerated plantation-slave voice:

"One night, lady — fine lady — and zappo you be a nigger again."

Even as I saw her try to squirm away from him — and realized in the small remaining reasoning part of my brain that his touch was repulsive to her — I screamed, ran halfway down the stairs, and lunged like a cavalier swordsman over the railing. Grace froze in position, one of his hands still on the side of her hip. The Man smiled, business as usual. My whole body trembled. Springing at him, I shoved Grace aside. My hands aimed for his throat. He offered no resistance, as usual. He let me grasp his throat and push him

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backwards. His feet slipped out from under him and, awkwardly, we both fell to the floor. I lost my grip and fell sideways. For a moment I scrambled around the floor like a disoriented sand crab. My confusion allowed enough time for Grace to get in the way. She stood over us, facing me. The Man lay still, calm. I rose to a crouch.

"No, Ben," Grace screamed. "Don't kill him. That's the one thing I'm —"

Whatever normally restrained me from violence, whatever held my punches even when in the middle of a brawl, whatever it was, had loosened. I had never touched Grace in anger. This time I swung a wild stiff armed left, hitting her in the middle and, at the same time, pushing her away. She doubled over. The Man looked at this with alarm, his first emotional reaction, and he sat up. I dived at him, but he easily maneuvered out of my way. When I had turned and positioned my feet in a better attacking stance, I saw that he had gone to Grace's side. She shook her head in response to whatever he whispered to her; she was straightening herself up slowly, carefully. He put his arm around her, apparently to lead her to the couch. I ran at him, leaping the last few feet, like a wild animal in one of those staged jungle films (but I was not a wild animal, that observing part of me which analyzed my actions was recording everything and slipping the fashionable metaphors out of the file). He deflected me with his forearm. I crashed into, and cracked, an old side table. Everything blurred for a few seconds. Back in focus, I saw him settling Grace onto the couch. Affectionately he rubbed her forehead. I flashed him as a witch doctor, bone in nose, striped and checked all over, beckoning her to a curative dance. Warned by my scream that I was attacking again, he stepped to the side of the couch, obviously to keep Grace out of the main fighting area. Again he did not resist, again we were on the floor, this time in front of the fireplace, this time in front of a pile of neatly quartered logs. I hit him in the face several times. He winced with the impact of the blows, but otherwise showed no emotion. The analyzing part of my brain provided a fast check list of the possible ways I could induce fight in this creature. There seemed no way. His face said no way, whitey. He was determined to show me the passions which had led to this moment, which he perhaps had planned for just this culmination. I flashed him in a toga, welcoming the knives. Son of a bitch, he deserved to die. I stopped hitting him and stared at his passive eyes. He smiled slightly. He knew.

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Feeling a new wave of added rage, I grabbed one of the quarter logs and raised it over my head. He looked at the weapon the same way he had observed my frenzied defiance. I started to bring the log down forcefully, intending to slam it against the side of his head, knowing that I would see no more expression on his face than the wince of death. Grace screamed. He looked. And of course I could not do it. Whatever shambles my brain was in, years of conditioning kept me from killing. I flung the log into the fireplace instead. Ashes came out of the fireplace opening in silent explosion.

I screamed, rolled off his body, and sprang to my feet. In complete rage. For the first time in my life, the analyzer clicked off, and I stepped into a blurred dream that even now I remember little of. Apparently I charged around the room, destroying, damaging, or otherwise disarraying anything in my way. I pulled pictures off the wall, broke them against furniture and other hard objects, tore up the brittle paper inside. I picked up pieces of furniture and smashed them. I grabbed piles of my manuscripts and threw them into the fireless fireplace. I smashed a mirror. I tossed books all over the room. I ruined the radio. I deliverately cut and bruised my body against many surfaces.

Afterward, they told me they had tried to restrain me, but I had just pushed them off. The Man said that under normal conditions he could have taken me, but he knew rage and he backed off after one try.

I came out of it suddenly, saw the two of them standing by the fireplace and staring at me, and I collapsed on the couch. Which was, incidentally, the only remaining upright piece of furniture in the room. Grace ran to me, sat beside me, and began her calming rites. I stared at the debris, tried to say something, but could only choke and cough.

The Man sat on the other side of me, smiled that slight smile of his, and said calmly, almost professorially:

"That's my reply. To your article. All of it, every moment of the last four days, what you felt inside all that time, what you felt inside just now — they're my reply."

We sat in silence for five or ten minutes. Grace administering, The Man helping where he could, me listening to the hacking sound in my breathing. Finally I turned to him, as if there'd been no time lapse, and said:

"Couldn't you've — couldn't you have sent in a letter to the editor?"

"No. I couldn't."

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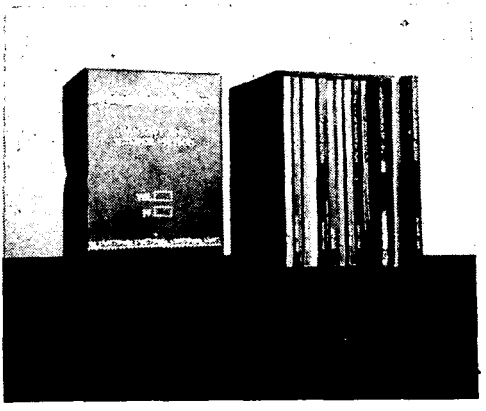
I nodded, knowing he was right.

He left a few minutes later, making a last offer to Grace to come with him. When she said she had to stay, he said he understood. Grace raised eyebrows at that, and he smiled broadly.

I limped to the window to watch his Mustang lead a herd of dust down the road. Grace stood by me, holding an unpainful part of my arm. I flashed us as saved homesteaders, standing by the pigpen gate and waving good-by to the tall black stranger in the white mask, and asking ourselves who was he, anyway, and why did he tamper with the normal corrupt running of the universe. When he'd gone, when the last perceivable speck of dust had settled, Grace tenderly turned me to her, and we kissed. There was no need for apologies, words, no need to beg absolution for each individual wrong I'd done her. There was, in fact, no scale of right or wrong for us to apply.



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Michael Coney's most recent stories here were the wry Tales of Finistelle. This new story of alternate worlds is a sequel to Mr. Coney's first contribution to F&SF ("Susanna, Susanna!" November 1972).

The Gateway to Now

by MICHAEL G. CONEY

Later in the evening I took Stratton back to my house-yacht. It was already eleven and the Falcombe streetlights were lit; indistinct orbs throwing a diffused glow through the rain which had abated to a steady drizzle. We turned off the narrow main street and splashed through the puddles across the quay. A single naked lamp shone above the water's edge; this was Falcombe Council's concession to myself as the only person living afloat during the off-season. The touristy fairy lights hung in dead festoons from the poles at the waterside.

We crossed the slippery, sagging plank and descended to the cabin; there was a stale smell of liquor and old cigarette smoke, together with undertones of propane gas. In the morning I would have to take a look at the cooker; it seemed I had a minor leak. I lit the stove and brewed coffee.

Stratton had drunk himself sober. He eyed me moodily, ignoring the beer we had brought back from the Shipwrights' Arms. "You're living on borrowed time, Maine," he said again.

I wished he would stop saying that. He had been repeating it all evening, dismally pleased with his melodramatic catchphrase. I told him to shut up. He smiled with his lips, his pink-rimmed eyes unamused.

"You've got nothing to lose," he said.

I took a sip of coffee. It tasted good. "What are you getting at?" I asked.

"We could use you. At the research station."

"You mean I'm expendable?"

"There's no risk. What happened today was unfortunate. An act of God. You've got to admit that."

Today a girl had died, a

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beautiful young girl named Susanna. Two girls named Susanna. Maybe an infinity of such girls in an infinity of parallel worlds, each one dying to maintain the parallel course of history.

That was why we had been drinking. Stratton and I had both loved Susanna.

In the morning I sensed a presence on the deck, pulled on some clothes and went above. The kid was back, fishing from the bows, his bait spread on damp newspaper. It stank.

"Clear off. Take that stuff with you. I've told you before."

He went, and I cooked a light breakfast. Stratton was opening his eyes and groaning.

"Christ, have I got a head."

"Get some coffee down, and I'll drive you to the station," I told him.

"Thanks. Have you thought any more about it? About helping us out at the station?"

"What exactly do you want me to do?" I asked carefully.

"I'll tell you when we get there."

We ate in silence, then drove in silence to the ugly concrete structure of Falcombe Research Station at the back of the town. The guard swung open the heavy gates, and we drove in; he saluted as we passed. Stratton was the director, and the guard smiled at me. Yesterday, before I had met Stratton, the guard had refused me entrance, no doubt detecting a Slavic cast to my countenance. Today with Stratton beside me, I was one of the good guys.

Stratton explained his theories as we sat in the sparse clinical utility of his office. "Last week you met a girl from parallel World II," he said. "Susanna. Our worlds are very close; the people in World II are essentially the same individuals as those in our own world. History tends to average out. We have a way of putting it: it's as though we're both heading for the same goal by slightly different paths which coincide most of the time — although the goal is positioned at an infinite time from now. The research station on World II is working on the same lines as our own, and I've no doubt that its director is almost identical to myself."

"I understand he is," I said. I had already made contact with World II through Susanna, their agent. And when she died, Susanna from World I had died also, in similar circumstances. History — inhuman, uncaring history — had averaged out. The paths had coincided again.

Stratton went on: "Visualize a circle of land, about thirty yards across, projected into a parallel

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world. Our agent, standing within this circle, is in a peculiar position. He must stay put, because to leave the circle would create a paradox."

I said, "Susanna told me. You can't leave the circle because that would mean you were existing in two places in the same world, at the same time. Your World I self and your World II self. So you have to sit there and wait for someone to make contact. A particular sort of someone."

"Someone like you." Stratton lit a cigarette, watching me.

Living on borrowed time.... Last week I had met Susanna, and I had stepped briefly into her world. We had conversed, we had made love. And I was able to do all this because, in her world, I did not exist.

I had already died.

Soon therefore, parallel worlds being what they are, I must die in my own world. History will average out.

"It's a great chance," said Stratton. "Susanna had to wait for a contact, but you don't have that problem. We project you straight to World II, and you can step out of the circle. You can walk around another world. Think of it, Maine!" He was puffing rapidly on his cigarette, eyes shining with excitement. "You can find out everything — you can compare histories, you can bring back tapes, newspapers.... Our whole research program will be simplified."

It wasn't his enthusiasm which caused me to agree to the proposal. I had my own reasons for wishing to visit World II.

I wanted to find out how, and why, I had died there.

Susanna had hinted that Stratton had something to do with it. I wondered if it would be possible to obtain enough information to avoid my own future death.

Later I stood in the charmed circle of soil where Susanna had died. The grey autumn sea pulsed in the little bay a hundred yards away, the rain splattered on the stone rectangle of the ruined hermit's cottage and dripped about me, large slow drops from the brown leaves of the tree under which I stood. Beside me was the blasted stump of the other tree, the one which had been scythed by the lightning flash which killed Susanna. The fallen trunk lay gnarled on the grass like a dead saurian.

I glanced at my watch. One minute to go. Back in the station, Stratton would shortly be throwing the switch. Then, for a period of two hours, I would live in parallel World II. There was a scuffling in the branches above me, and a squirrel descended the trunk. It hopped to the wet grass and

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regarded me, brown and curious and tame.

Then it was gone. The scene before me shifted, an infinitesimal abrupt movement like a cut in a movie. The sea was still grey however, and the rain still drifted inland.

I stepped into World II.

I walked rapidly up the hillside which flanked the little bay and took the cliff path towards Falcombe. Soon the town was visible below me, wet grey roofs gleaming dully on the edge of the estuary which stretched inland between the hills. I pulled the hat over my eyes and turned up my coat collar, huddling within my clothing as I walked. Stratton, with his love of melodrama, had made subtle alterations to my face with theatrical make-up; it would, he said, be unfortunate if I were recognized. A dead man walking about his home town might be called upon for explanations.

Soon the path became a road as it descended between small hotels and guest houses closed for the winter; they were dead, with curtained windows and firmly shut doors. I walked on; here and there a few people passed me by without a glance. It was a peculiar sensation walking through Falcombe; the place seemed unchanged, the shops identical, and I recognized many of the faces I saw. Stratton had said that World II was very similar to our own world, and he was right. The resemblance was so uncanny that I began to forget my transition or, maybe, subconsciously to disbelieve that it had happened. I entered the Shipwrights' Arms almost automatically.

Wilfred was behind the counter, polishing a glass. Otherwise the place was empty. The regular noon-hour drinkers had not yet arrived.

"Scotch, please." I remembered not to address him by name.

He barely glanced at me as he handed me the glass. I sat down by the window to consider the next move. The ashtrays were different from the Shipwrights' that I knew; they bore an ad for Johnny Walker. Otherwise the room was much the same.

"Traveling through?" Wilfred made a token effort at conversation.

"That's right. I've been here before, though. I thought I might look a few people up before I left."

He was watching me with a faint curiosity. "I thought I'd seen you somewhere before. Never forget a face." He glanced at the door expectantly; the latch clicked and it swung open.

"Morning, Tom," he said.

The small man walked up to the bar. "Beer, please, Wilf." He turned around, saw me, and turned

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away again after a brief, searching look. I knew him in my world as Tom Parkes, operator of the hoverferry concession. Presumably he ran the same business here.

He leaned against the counter, glass in hand, and regarded me again. "Stranger in these parts?" he asked pleasantly.

"That's right."

"We don't get many visitors at this time of year."

"I'm just here for a few hours," I told him. "I wonder...do you know a man called Bill Stratton?"

"Stratton from the research station?"

"That's right. I wanted to see him before I left."

The two men glanced at each other. "How long since you saw him last?" asked Wilfred after a pause.

"A fair time ago," I replied vaguely.

"Maybe you haven't heard about his accident."

"Accident?"

"Terrible thing. Lucky to be alive. Half his face burnt off, and him a good-looking fellow.... There's some people in the town who say it was attempted murder, and they may be right. Still," Wilfred smiled coldly, "the other bastard died. He was a Russian, I reckon. A spy with a bomb."

This Wilfred might exist in an alternative world, but he was very similar to the Wilfred I knew, suspecting a Red behind every crimson necktie. "A bit unlikely," I said mildly.

"That station's top-secret," insisted Wilfred. "You get a lot of odd customers snooping around, and Mister John Maine was one of them."

And Mister John Maine was, or is, me....

I paid up and left the Shipwright's. It had stopped raining for the moment, and I walked quickly down towards the quay, glancing at my watch. I had ninety minutes left, long enough for a quick look at the house-yacht before I visited the hospital. Preoccupied, I automatically greeted Esme, the young girl from the supermarket, as she was walking home to lunch. She glanced at me startled, then passed by with a stiff look. She thought I was a stranger, making a pass at her. I was thankful for Stratton's make-up. If she had seen my real face, she would have screamed the place down; a walking corpse would have stimulated even her rather dull wits....

The house-yacht was a mess, a totally incinerated black hulk lying on the water like a huge dead beetle. Nothing remained of the superstructure, and in places the hull was burnt right down to the waterline. It would obviously go to

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the bottom on the next easterly blow unless the council towed it away. The inevitable youthful angler sat on the remains of the bows, trailing his line in the swift outflow of tide. I thought of the many times I had turned his Doppelganger off my own, World I boat,and wondered if he might be able to give me some information — at least to tell me what had happened to the boat.

"Hi, Isaac Walton!" I hailed him, unconsciously using my normal, World I greeting.

He swung round abruptly with a look of abject terror. He had heard a voice from the tomb. He couldn't have had time to catch more than a glimpse of my outline on the quay when he overbalanced and fell, with a squeal of pure fear, into the rapid current. I jumped onto the boat and hung over the stern, trying to grab his shoulder as he was swept past. He was too far out. I scrambled back to the quay and began to run along it, keeping pace with him.

There is a boatyard at the end of the quay. I dodged among the upturned dinghies, keeping my eyes on him and yelling reassurance. I jumped from the slipway to the lawn of the Falcombe Hotel where a knot of people were already milling uncertainly at the water's edge, shouting instructions. Then I thought of the jetty further on, where the hoverferry plies between Falcombe and the village on the far side of the estuary. It is a raised structure on piles. It ought to be possible to climb down the piles and catch the kid as he passed. I left the beer lawn, ran up the steps past the hotel and sprinted along the street.

I turned right, down more steps and clattered along the wooden jetty. An elderly woman leaned against the railings, eking out her declining years by gazing at the timeless water. She looked around, startled, as I climbed the railings beside her and dropped out of sight to the cross-member below.

The water swirled by, about a yard under my feet. Clutching a blackened upright, I looked up the estuary. There was a conical buoy in midstream about fifty yards away; the tide raced past it creating a wake like a destroyer. The kid was clinging to the buoy and a rowboat was crabbing across the tide towards him. As I watched, he was hauled aboard.

Obscurely deflated, I climbed back on to the jetty. The old woman's calves were gnarled and knotted like driftwood. She met my eyes with a pale gaze of insipid curiosity, like a sheep.

They let me see Stratton. I didn't think I stood a chance of getting past the reception desk, but

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soon I was cimbing the stairs behind the muscular calves of the nurse and being shown into the white aseptic ward and being told I could have five minutes, no more.

He was a hump under the blankets, his head a globe of white bandages resting on a white pillow. He might have been anybody. Or nobody, had it not been for the gash in the dressings which denoted his mouth.

"Hello, Stratton," I said.

The form went rigid. The mouth whispered. "You sound like Maine. The nurse said you called yourself Maine, and I didn't believe her. Yesterday they told me Maine was dead, had been dead for days. Who are you, for God's sake?"

"I'm Maine."

"They said there had been an explosion, and Maine was killed."

"You don't remember what happened?"

The nurse spoke quickly. "Amnesia. I'd rather you didn't press him on that point now, Mr....Maine." She hesitated at my name. Maybe, in this world, she had known me. And I didn't look quite like the Maine she had known.

"I was Susanna's contact," I said. "I've come from World I."

"From what we call World II," Stratton said dryly. "Human conceit takes many forms. One day we may discover which is the original world." He had accepted me in a remarkably matter-of-fact manner.

"What have you discovered?" I asked. "I'd like to get as much information as possible. Perhaps we could co-operate on this thing. I've no doubt I shall be visiting your world again."

The nurse was beginning to assume a disapproving expression as Stratton replied. "Parallel worlds," he said. "So nearly identical. A funny thing — it seems that in actual time your world lags behind ours in its parallel events by from one to three days. History averages out, but the events are not simultaneous. You come after us."

"And I'm still alive." My mouth was suddenly dry. "How much longer have I got, Stratton?"

"Your counterpart in our world died ten days ago. Make what you like of that."

"You must leave now, Mr. Maine," said the nurse firmly, leading me away. She shut the door on Stratton.

"How did it happen?" I asked. She was very pretty. I wondered if she had her double on my world...inconsequential thoughts can occur at the oddest moments.

"It was a fire on board Mr. Maine's house-yacht," she said. "Nobody knows how it started but the police think the two men had been drinking and fell asleep, and a

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cigarette set fire to the bedclothes on one of the berths."

I stared at her. Stratton had slept on the house-yacht last night, and so had I. We had been drinking. In my world, there had been no fire. Maybe my time had passed. Maybe this one event, the fire on World II, was not to be paralleled on my own world. Maybe I would live....

"You were saying in there..." She continued hesitantly. "It's none of my business, I know. Was all that true, about parallel worlds, I mean? That you're from another world?" Her eyes were blue, like Susanna's.

"It was true."

"I knew Mr. Maine. He was... nice. I don't believe all those things they're saying about him, in the town." She looked at me steadily. "I just wanted you to know that, that's all."

I asked her whom I should ask for, the next time I visited the hospital, and she told me: Nurse Marianne Peters. Not merely Nurse Peters....

Half an hour later I was standing within the time circle, watching the sea, waiting to be recalled to my own world.

My hovercar flickered into existence, squatting on flattened grass which an instant before had been tall, rippling in the wind. I left the circle, climbed in, and drove for the station.

Stratton was interested in my report. He questioned me closely, the recording spool spinning lazily at his elbow. He was particularly fascinated by his Doppelganger's theory of the time-lag between parallel events in the two worlds.

"An infinity of worlds..." he murmured. "Almost parallel, yet each slightly divergent. And a small time-lag between one and the next. I wonder....Let's make it simple; imagine a total of 1000 worlds. Say we are World 500. Suppose we are able to visit World 100, we might find they are 20 years behind us in their history."

I was beginning to see the implications. "And World 900 could be 20 years in the future. If we could go there, now..."

"It seems that it would be a sort of time travel," Stratton completed my thoughts. "Of course, our future events wouldn't exactly parallel theirs, but generally we would be able to get an idea of what's in store for us."

We each pursued our own thoughts for a while, in silence, Stratton chain-smoking, his swarthy face abstracted, his eyes following the upward drift of smoke. I found that I was wondering what was in store for me. Stratton's thoughts had also turned to the personal.

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"In the hospital..." he murmured. "You say there was a fire on your boat, and you were killed, but I got away with injuries. How serious was it? What sort of shape was my... double in?"

"Pretty bad, I'd say."

He regarded me thoughtfully. "There's no reason to suppose that a serious injury in one world will be repeated in another," he said. "The parallel appears to relate more to death."

"Thanks very much."

"No, listen to me, Maine. Death *matters*, because it removes the consciousness which might have been able to observe future events, and to shape them. The very existence of these worlds is dependent on the intelligences which inhabit them. If the same people live in World II as World I, then the histories of those worlds are bound to follow similar paths, because the same people will shape that history. Of course, you'll get a few discrepancies, but these will average out, as we've seen."

"You're wondering when I will average out?" I asked coldly.

"You may be lucky." He was trying to reassure me. "You might live a long life. After all, there must be discrepancies; otherwise how would we know that parallel worlds existed? If they were completely identical to this world, then they would *be* this world."

We discussed the matter for a while, and I agreed to continue research into World II with another journey the following day. Stratton's position was difficult. So far as he knew, I was the only person capable of physical travel between the two worlds, and he wanted to make as much use of me as possible. While I still had time. His eagerness to pursue research had to be tempered with a certain consideration for my feelings.

It was early evening when I left the station and took my hovercar back to the park on Falcombe quay. The Salvation Army band was playing, and the narrow street echoed to the dismal notes of a crudely rendered hymn. A few people stood watching, waiting for the pubs to open. My feeling of depression intensified.

It was with a strange sensation of having traveled backwards in time that I found my house-yacht intact. A sort of reverse deja vu, as I saw the last cold rays of the sun glinting from the cabin roof which I had repainted last week. Somehow, it would have been more in keeping with my mood if I had been confronted with the blackened hulk of my World II boat.

A middle-aged woman stood on the edge of the quay watching a kid fishing from my foredeck. It was the usual kid. I knew an instant's quick rage.

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"Get off my damned boat!" I yelled.

The woman wheeled round, her nondescript face expressing feeble outrage. "There's no call to go speaking to the boy like that!" she expostulated.

"That happens to be my boat, madam."

"The kid's doing no harm." Her pale eyes were gleaming; she was winding herself up for one of the lengthy harangues so dear to her type. The boy was standing, watching us with delighted interest. We made a welcome change from grey mullet. "You rich folk with boats, you think you own the town," the woman continued, getting into her stride.

"I'm not having stinking fish all over my foredeck," I said forcibly. "He can fish from the quay." I paused for her reply, a mistake I've made before. It's best not to let them reply. Just keep talking, otherwise they'll keep talking.

"He can't fish from the quay because your boat's in the way, taking up all the space. I've lived here forty years, and every year more of you foreigners move in, pushing us around, and if you think I'm going to have my boy spoken to like that, you're very much mistaken..."

Her words had become a jumble of incomprehensibility, staccato yet continuous, like Morse. I was striding down the gangplank. The kid backed to the prow, watching my approach with alarm. The woman, who I dimly realized had identified herself as his mother, screeched unintelligibly from the quay. I stormed across the deck. The kid cowered away. The woman screamed.

I grabbed at him too late, losing my grip on his jacket as he overbalanced and fell backwards with cartwheeling arms.

"You pushed him! I saw that! You pushed him in!"

Now that the kid had got his deserts, I felt better. I turned to face her. "You're mistaken," I said politely. "I tried to stop him falling."

"Well, get him out! Don't just stand there talking!"

"He can swim, can't he?"

"But the tide..." The woman was trotting along the quay in panic. "He'll be carried out to sea! Go in after him! What sort of a man do you call yourself?"

I don't believe I call myself any sort of a man — I don't need to, being perfectly confident on that point. Two factors prevented me from jumping into the dark swirling water and attempting to get the kid to land. Firstly, as I hurried along the quay with the woman beside me, watching the kid struggling in the water, the sense of deja vu had returned. I *knew* that

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he would grab the conical buoy, and we could rescue him at leisure. Secondly, I was scared for my own safety. I didn't want to give fate any chance to level up the score. I wanted to live as long as possible.

It was like the rerun of a bad movie and, on second viewing, about as realistic. Here was I, walking along the quay, briskly. Foreground. Then, middle distance and providing dramatic impact to the scene — one child in imminent danger of drowning. Backdrop of grey water and a few scattered boats. Apart from the main conversation on the quay, sound effects were provided by a splashing attributed to the child, and melancholy gull noises. Background music by the Salvation Army. Unconvinced, I said to the woman:

"Why don't you jump in and save him yourself?"

She stared at me, and she was crying. "For pity's sake, I can't swim. Please, Mister." All belligerence was knocked out of her. As we looked at each other, something seemed to slot into place, and I was back in reality, here and now.

And there is no conical buoy opposite the slipway in Falcombe harbor. It broke free in a storm last week; I remember fending it away from my boat. It has not been replaced.

I was running, bursting through the knot of bystanders around the band, racing up the street pursued by cries of irate enquiry, down the steps to the ferry jetty, over the railings and down to the dripping, barnacled cross-member.

There was no old woman on the jetty; nobody to watch and wonder as I waited there. When the child came drifting past, too far out to reach, there was nobody to wince and huddle within their clothes in rather-you-than-me security as I jumped into the water and began to swim.

But when I got back — when half an hour later I made it, towing the unconscious boy to the rocky beach under the headland — there was a crowd waiting, and it seemed I was some kind of hero.

One of my more irrelevant memories is of a young Salvation Army girl, face grave and sexless like a nun's under her uniform cap, offering me a drink of brandy. Brandy, her concerned eyes seemed to be saying, stimulates the heart and is an invaluable remedy for exhaustion — unlike Scotch, which merely makes you drunk and disgusting. It was Martell Three Star, and I wondered where she had got it; certainly she displayed a touching ignorance and allowed me several large mouthfuls before the bandleader eased the bottle from my cramped fingers.

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Then the average bystander — the middle-aged kindly woman who is always at the scene of strife ready-equipped — wrapped a blanket around my shoulders and handed me a cup of tea, which I drank with every appearance of gratitude. It seemed a pity to spoil the performance.

Before they carried me in triumphal procession through the streets of Falcombe, I caught sight of the kid, now shivering and conscious under a blanket similar to mine. They had brought a stretcher down the narrow cliff path; a nurse was there. I went over to him.

"Thank the gentleman, Tim," said his mother. He did. His eyes were pink-rimmed like an albino rabbit's. The nurse adjusted the blanket around him. Her name, I knew, was Nurse Marianne Peters. Unless, in my world, she was already married....

The mother thanked me too, brokenly. Our difference of opinion was forgotten. It had to be that way; she was not the type to fight the tide of public opinion.

The news went out on the local portovee channel early the following morning, and my picture was in the evening edition of the paper. Journalist saves child in sea drama. During the remainder of the day I was besieged by the curious and inquisitive; they stood on the quay staring at the house-yacht quietly and solemnly, like pilgrims at journey's end. They must have been very short of news that day.

Stratton arrived at eight o'clock, bringing whisky. By this time most of the sightseers had gone home, and I had been contemplating a quick visit to the Shipwright's Arms; his coming, however, rendered this unnecessary. He had a copy of the paper with him.

"Is this how it happened?" he asked.

I told him the true story — the argument with the mother, the circumstances of the kid's fall. "I didn't want to jump in," I confessed. "I thought he'd be all right. I'd forgotten all about that buoy breaking away from its mooring. I'd got so wrapped up in the idea of parallel events that it didn't seem necessary to help in any way. I knew he'd be safe, and that was good enough for me. Why get wet, I thought?"

I poured two more Scotches. "Why risk my life, I mean," I amended. "You know, Stratton, there's something wrong with the time theory."

"How's that?"

"We've been assuming that events always happen in World II before here. But that kid was saved first in World II; then, afterwards,

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he would have died here if I hadn't gone in after him. Which would have meant that he would have died in World II, if events were to be kept in parallel. Afterwards."

The Scotch was taking effect. I was beginning to feel drowsy and my thoughts were muddled. I lit a cigarette to clear my head.

"I don't think the time-lag represents a hard and fast rule," Stratton replied. His voice was slightly slurred, too. It was going to be one of those nights. "In any case, your reasoning is faulty. He might have drowned in World I, but he was saved. Then, afterwards, the same thing happened in our world. He lived, either way."

"So if I hadn't gone in after him, someone else would?"

Stratton smiled. "Even that doesn't follow. The fact is, that you *did* save him." The smile was fixed and alcoholic, and I felt that Stratton's obscure dislike of me was surfacing again. Some day, maybe soon, Stratton was going to be instrumental in my death.... He was speaking again. "The circumstances were fixed; they've happened in an infinity of worlds before this. The kid lived through yesterday. He always has, and he always will live through yesterday. In the next world, and the one after that, his life might not even be endangered. He will merely live through the day which we call October 20, and never know his luck."

My head was muzzy. In a minute, I decided, we would have a cup of coffee. The air was thick with cigarette smoke and the underlying sickly tang of propane. I would have to get that leak fixed. Propane gas could accumulate like an invisible time bomb in the bilges and around floor level; I have known people having to pump it out by running their bilge pumps until they hoped it was all gone. I stood, and went on deck for a breath of fresh air.

The streetlights were on; it was a fine night and there was a hint of early frost in the air. Across the water the lights of the occasional yachts twinkled against the dark bulk of the opposite hillside.

I thought of Susanna, and the fact that in the short period of our acquaintance she had never seen my house-yacht. She would never have been able to see it, because she was from World I.... I wondered if she had ever been on board the boat of the other me. We never did have time to discuss exactly how well she knew my Doppelganger in her world.

I wondered if it might be possible one day for me to visit one of the earlier worlds where Susanna still breathed and laughed. If I met her, would she love me? That was something I would have to find out.

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If I had time. I thought of the charred remains of my boat on World II, and the words of the people I had met there. Stratton and I, together on the boat. I shivered suddenly; the air was chill.

I turned and went back into the cabin. Stratton had fallen asleep, his legs stretched out, his hand hanging limply over the arm of the chair. As I watched, the cigarette slipped from his relaxed fingers and fell to the floor.

So slowly.

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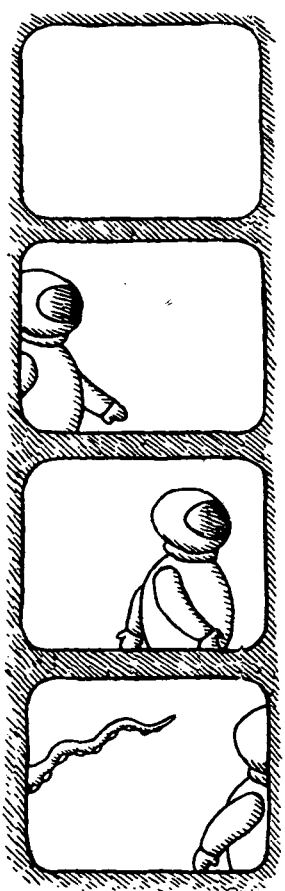
MICKEY WHO?

This month's film column is going to be mostly about a book. It is, however, a book about films, most of which are fantasies, that have been curiously neglected in the literature on fantastic cinema. The book is *The Art of Walt Disney* by Christopher Finch; at this writing it's been out for several months, but I'd been prevented (or saved) from tackling it due to the spate of films we've had recently that have been of interest. However, this has been a deadly quiet month in my neck of the woods save for some minor fare on TV, so I picked it up again (not easy; it weighs eight pounds on my bathroom scale). I have no idea how well it's doing sales wise, but it may eventually turn up on remainder tables at a fraction of its currently mind-boggling price (I figure about $5 a pound, given the inconsistencies of my bathroom scale).

If that should be the case, I advise grabbing it; otherwise, no, save for really dedicated Disney freaks. The book is for me almost exactly like my trip to Walt Disney World: incredibly handsome and quite magical for a little while, but soon creating an acute craving for some *real* fantasy rather than the

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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vapid imitation that Disney has specialized in (I have a persistent day dream of letting Conan loose in Disneyland. What a title — "Conan in Disneyland"!).

I can already hear most of you saying snidely, "Well, what did you expect?" In a country that within a decade has turned almost totally to pop culture, Disney and his films still represent a sort of middle-American *kitsch* that almost everybody can feel snobbish about. But it's not that easy, especially in the context of this column. Not only has the Disney studio, for its half-century of existence, been almost totally concerned with fantasy as a subject, but for most of us, a Disney film was our first encounter with the fantastic cinema. An almost universal experience for my generation was either the Wicked Witch trauma ("Snow White") or the lost mother trauma ("Bambi"). Since Disney films are "timeless," succeeding generations have not been immune to the same things, or were possibly even more deeply scarred by the likes of Mary Poppins. Yet when film fantasy is discussed or written about, the Disney films are seldom mentioned. There are several reasons for this, I'd guess. One is the stigma of "children's fare." Another is that the animated film is almost a seperate medium. And a third is that these films, for the most part, are not science fiction or horror, the two major genres of cinematic fantasy; there is almost no "pure" fantasy in the medium (as opposed to the numerous examples in literature) *except* for the Disney films.

Anyhow, back to the book. Its mere existence in a way gives the lie to what I said about cultural recognition of Disney. It's published by the very, very prestigious Harry N. Abrams, producers of top art books; ten years ago the idea of Abrams doing a book on Disney would have been as unlikely as rock at Carnegie Hall. And it *is* some production. A transparent jacket with a bas-relief mouse underneath. More foldouts than a decade of Playboy. And hundreds of drawings and photographs, many of them done large-sized and/or in color. Particularly interesting for those of us who have a fondness for much of the earlier Disney work are reproductions of material that was never used, such as preliminary studies for the "Pastoral" section of "Fantasia" done in a 19th century Symbolist style (kin to original drawings for Dunsany's works) rather than the Art Deco flavor eventually used. The book is definitely for looking.

Reading is another matter. There is, given the size of the thing, still quite a bit of room for text. Here lies the problem. It is fairly

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common knowledge that the Disney enterprises are as PR conscious as General Motors and more successful at it. The text here reads like one of their lengthier press releases and for the most part is just plain dull. The most negative word in the book seems to be "unsatisfactory."

Certainly in a production this spectacular one does not expect anything so sharply critical and pithy as Richard Schickel's 1968 *The Disney Version* (still available in paperback, I think). And there *are* some interesting anecdotes and insights into the working processes of the Disney studios, particularly *re* the early days. But the author seems to be treading so cautiously for fear of giving offense that the text doesn't even achieve objectivity. For instance, would the pure image of the Disney studios have cracked if it had been revealed that the "Dance of the Hours" sequence (again "Fantasia") was a comic rip-off of an overproduced "highbrow" ballet sequence in "The Goldwyn Follies," choreographed by Balanchine? Or, as I pointed out last month, the Wicked Witch was a line-for-line copy of Helen Gahagan Douglas in "She"? But no; most of what we're given to read is a tedious account of who did what on what film, and how he did it.

So, if you're a Disney addict, or have a very strong coffee table with nothing on it, get the book. If you're just mildly interested in Disney and your coffee table already has something on it, wait.

A final word on the Disney phenomenon. One wonders what the animated film could have become if it hadn't been so thoroughly dominated by this one man. The potential for fantasy is still enormous; how long will "animated film" be equated with the pattern of cute, made-for-kiddies, sweetness-and-light-with-music cinema that he established? Given the technical expertise eventually reached, what classics of science fiction, fantasy and the supernatural could be made into movies in animated form that would be possible in no other way. Think about it.

Little screen department ... "This Island Earth" came around again after quite a while. Plot, acting and scientific background are pretty bad; nonetheless, the basic concept (it's from a novel from within the field, a rarity) and the effects are quite wonderful. This is a case where a color set is absolutely necessary; the entire last half of the movie looks like the best Bergey covers from dear old Thrilling Wonder Stories ...

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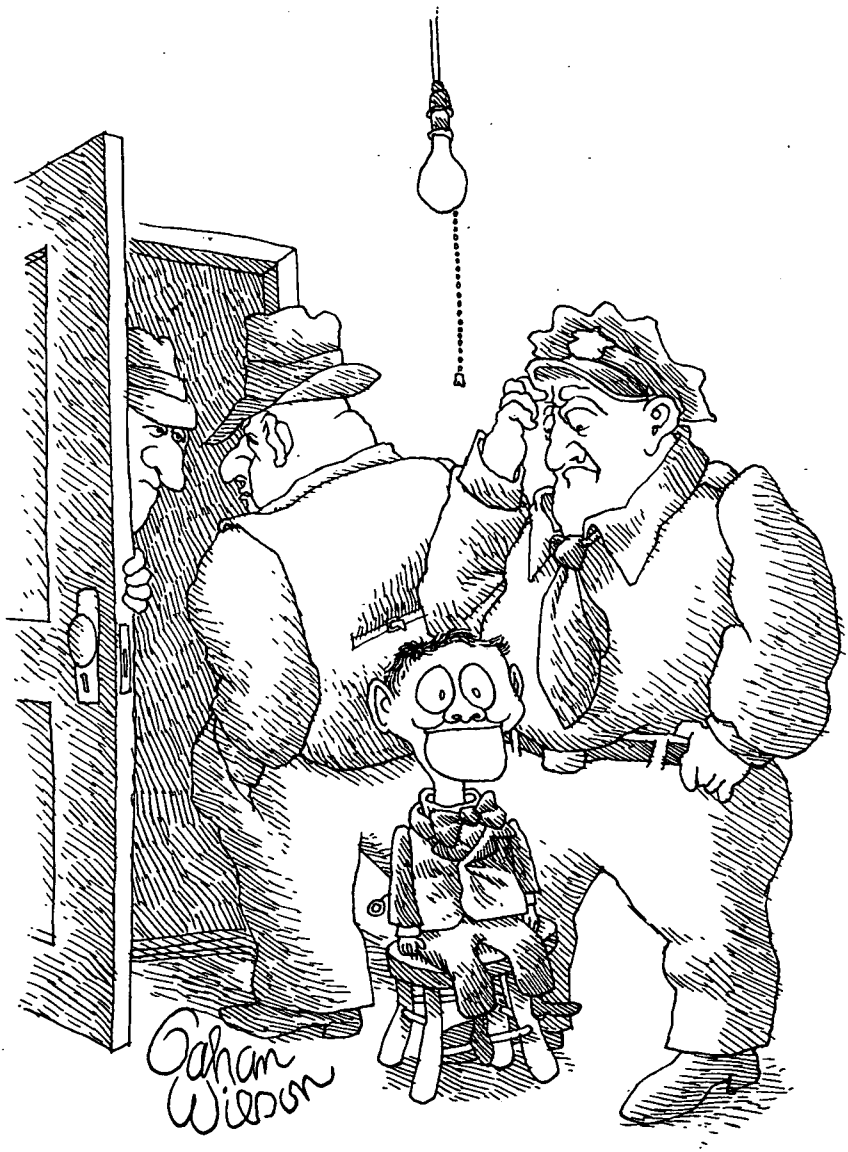

"We're getting nowhere with this one. How you doing with his buddy?"

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Barry Malzberg's new story concerns pulling oneself together in the future. But don't worry, we'll have help. As always.

Twenty Sixty-one

by BARRY N. MALZBERG

Bleuler said, "I think I'd better be switched to a mixed type."

"No chance," the technician said.

"I don't think you understand," Bleuler said a little more earnestly. "The paranoid symptoms are fascinating, of course, and I wouldn't have given up this experience for anything, but I'm starting to become grandiose now and also to hallucinate, and this is highly disturbing."

"Live with it."

"Please," Bleuler said, rubbing his palms together, "you could at least hear me out. I'm trying to be reasonable about this." He cleared his throat and said rather ponderously, "I'm beginning to feel that I'm a Christ-figure instead of a mere humble alienist. Imagery of crucifixions and so on. So if you don't mind," he said, giving the technician a winning smile and brushing some lint from his shoulders backhandedly, "I think that the chronic undifferentiated syndrome would be much better for all of us now."

The technician grunted. He had a blunted affect — this came with the job, he supposed, but it was more than the job; hell, *everyone* had a bit of a blunted affect, nowadays — but this did not preclude his ability to make intelligent sense of the situation. He would make intelligent sense of the situation. "Explain yourself," he said, shifting in the chair, sneaking a look at the clock. In fifteen minutes or a little less, the session would be over, and that was worth looking forward to. He could stand anything knowing that he was almost out of this.

"It's like so," Bleuler said, leaning forward again. He was a small nervous man with a beard and piercing eyes, the beard false, of course, the eyes' brightness drug-induced; but in certain angles and aspects he looked exactly the way he should. "My name is Ernst Bleuler. I am an alienist and the

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discoverer of schizophrenia. Schizophrenia is a mental disorder literally derived from the Germanic roots *chiz:* to break, to shatter, the breaking and shattering of the personality, that is to say, into its component parts so that they no longer co-ordinate, the emotions and the will. Before my own contribution, the disease was known as dementia praecox, dementia of the young, so-called because the disease was characteristically manifested in adolescence and highly misunderstood. I have been able to prove first of all that the condition is not limited to the young."

Bleuler was becoming excited, his limbs heaving now in the unco-ordinated manner of schizoids under stress, the technician noted. "It is a clear, distinct mental illness often appearing in but hardly limited to the young," he said rather hysterically, "and it can be further divided into six subtypes, although of course they won't get into that stuff for years and years. At the present time I am a schizophrenic paranoid type characterized classically by unsystematized delusions of persecution and a confusion of identity, but the syndrome has started to shift into megalomania." He rubbed his palms together, looked at them, winked spasmodically. "This is quite dangerous," he said.

"Is it now?"

"Of course it is," Bleuler said. "Once the paranoia modulates into religious or political fantasies, the patient can become genuinely dangerous to himself and others. Reality contact may be severed."

"Is that so?"

"Of course it's so. So I think it's time to reverse the syndrome. I'd like to become a chronic undifferentiated."

"You said that," the technician said, "already. Nevertheless, you must understand the policies and procedures of the center, Dr. Bleuler. You were inducted into the paranoid syndrome," and here the technician took a folder from a desk drawer, looked through it quickly for verification, then left it open before him, "at your own request only two days ago and signed on for a full week. Five days more remain, that is to say. Alterations of the cycle are very difficult and medically dangerous. At this moment your circulatory system is literally awash with potent drugs, the reversal of their effects might even be more damaging —"

"Enough," Bleuler said as if to someone in a corner of the room, "leave me alone now," and then turned, leapt at the technician, seized him by the collar and closed distance. The technician felt the room wavering, saw Bleuler momentarily as a dwarf throttling

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him, and only through an effort of will was he able to break the hold by chopping frantically at a wrist. Bleuler receded, gasping. Schizoids were very strong; they could sustain a high degree of muscle tension. Also, they did not feel weather as the normals did. The technician looked at Bleuler, as the man now began to sob, and wondered, not for the first time, if working at the center was really worth it. A man could be killed by one of these lunatics. But then again, there were the benefits.

"I'm sorry about that," Bleuler said, and with the characteristic emotional lability of the disease he indeed seemed to have changed from a threatening to a sorrowful condition. "I really am, I warned you that I wasn't right." He sobbed once convulsively, rubbed at his eyes. "The paranoid delusions are much stronger all the time, and of course the religious overlay would rationalize. As you can see, I'm being very objective about this. The intellectual hemisphere is walled off, intact. I could kill. You'd better give me some help."

The technician looked at the clock again. Now it was only ten minutes until session's end...but if something happened to Bleuler here, he might be tied up for hours filling reports, making a formal presentation, answering the queries of the supervisors. He was authorized to murder patients, of course, but bureaucratically speaking, he would have to answer for it. All in all, it was not worth it. It simply was not worth it. The hell with Bleuler. It was his risk.

He reached into another side of the desk and took out a small vial.

"I think that's the right idea," Bleuler said, his eyes emitting a feeble light. "Really, it's much easier to do it this way; I knew that you were lying about the dangers of reversal; it's just easier to let the reactions go on but only to a point. I don't want to make difficulties for anyone; it's simply that my tolerance is low —"

The technician quieted him by shoveling a pill directly into Bleuler's mouth. Bleuler brought his teeth down just missing a finger, chewed it meditatively while the technician made an entry in the open case folder, initialed it and, closing the folder, put it away. He looked up to find Bleuler staring at him from a different face.

"My name is not Ernst Bleuler," he said.

"That's right," said the technician.

"I am someone else whose name is actually unimportant. I am forty-one years old, classification B-20 in the underclass."

"Correct. All correct."

"I have been suffering from schizophrenia, paranoid type, self-

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induced, and the concurrent delusion that I was Ernst Bleuler, originator of the name and modern definition of the disease. This is a common autocratic fantasy."

"Of course," the technician said. He stood.

"I've got a few problems, but nothing that I can't control. In fact," the man who was Bleuler said, standing with the technician and beginning to weep, "what I have now is merely a normal and terrible depressive reaction. I think I'll go home and kill myself."

"Not so bloody soon," the technician said. He moved toward a wall, his gestures animated for the first time since Bleuler had entered. The clock showed a few minutes left, but the hell with that; for all intents and purposes the interview was over right now. "You have something to do first."

"Do I?" the man who was Bleuler said. His face was as dull as if it had been scrubbed down.

"Of course there is," the technician said a little coaxingly. "Don't you remember?"

"Remember what?" the man said. His head lolled; he put a hand on a check as if to steady it. "I don't remember a thing. Don't tell me that you're going to force something on me, now. All my life I've been pushed around, and I just can't take it any more. I'm entitled to be treated like a human being, don't you think?"

"It's quite simple," the technician said. "Don't cry." He took the man by the hand, led him, both staggering a little, to the other side of the desk and placed him like an object in the seat which the technician had occupied. Almost immediately the man who was Bleuler took on a little color and life. The energizing effects of the analytic role, and so on. Well fuck that. The technician went to the other side of the desk, sat and leaned forward. There was a considerable pause.

Finally, the man who was Bleuler said as if reading the words off the wall, "Yes? What is it?"

"Ah," the technician said. "Well, then." He rubbed his hands together, looked down, looked up, checked the situation. The man would hold. He would definitely hold. "Doctor Bleuler," he said, "I'd like to be a catatonic now if you don't mind. The schizo-affective symptoms are fascinating, of course, but I'm beginning to get delusions that I'm a technician and that this is an institution of some kind where people who cannot bear their lives switch off roles with the help of drugs and treat one another."

"Of course," Bleuler said. He backhanded some more lint. "Go on."

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After publishing several good stories by Charles Runyon, we finally have the true story of his life, which goes (condensed): "Born 1928. Grew to manhood on a farm in Missouri. My chief difficulty with writing has always been work. Against John Creasy's 500-odd books, I can only count 30 published books in fourteen years of free-lancing. However, this has provided me with enough to live in Mexico, Ireland, Spain, Morocco, Arizona and Missouri."

Once There Were Cows

by CHARLES W. RUNYON

It was my first landing, and so I figured the best thing to do was to stay out of everybody's way. I grabbed my two cases of equipment, ran down the ramp to my billeting area, and set up my living cube in a record time of eight minutes, two seconds. I packed a long-distance mike and a scanner into my belt pouch and stepped out just as our ship spewed itself into the green-yellow sky. I told myself I was excited rather than scared — but the more rigidly I tried to stand, the more my legs shook inside my boots. Nothing in Language Corps training had prepared me for the shouting chaos of helmeted men, the churning tractors, and the heavy pulled-down feeling of standing in double-gee gravity. I saw the defense platoon filling bags with purple dirt and stacking them around their bunker. The long titanium barrels of the blasters gleamed dull and deadly in the afternoon sun and gave me a kind of fluttery feeling in the stomach. The geology crew was already sinking a drill into the virgin skin of Brisali's Planet. Everybody seemed to be in groups, working with comrades who knew what to do. I was the only language technician in the company — the only one on this world.

I went looking for the only friend I'd made on the way out, a Vegan gunner named Moko. I found him unloading food cartons while Kettles, our company cook, straddled a campstool and crunched his pipe between his teeth.

"We're bait," he grunted, blowing out a cloud of acrid smoke. "Worms on a hook. We don't even know what kinda fish is gonna bite."

Moko lifted a case of food concentrate off a cargo sled and carried it to a loading flat. He had

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his shirt off, and the muscles writhed like oily black cables across his back. "We're more like canaries from Old Earth. I saw them on tape. They lowered them into mines to find out if the air was deadly." Purple dust flared out as he dropped the case. He turned and saw me. "Hi, Lippy. Got your gear stowed already?"

"I didn't have much." I slapped the pouch at my belt, trying to act casual. "We've got twenty minutes before flag raising. Wanta look the place over?"

Moko looked at Kettles, who scowled and jerked his head toward a string of loaded cargo sleds.

"Later," said Moko. "I got this special duty due to being seven seconds late strapping in for landing. Anyway we got orders not to leave the burn until the defense platoon clears the wogs out of the area."

I felt a sinking in my stomach. "They found natives already?"

Moko nodded, dropping another case amid another swirl of purple dust. "Recon picked them up on the heat sensors. Ninety-four warm living bodies scattered through that bunch of trees down by the river. Tomorrow at dawn we smoke the area and move in behind a force field."

I felt sick. "You mean — just blast them out?"

"We push, to see how well they push back. That's how we gauge their weapon strength."

The cook grunted. "If they've got more than we have, we call down the sentinel ship and fry them with heat cones." He chuckled as he held a lighter over his pipe. "Then the grounders can land and start breeding more grounders."

I stared at the burn scar which discolored half his face and twisted his lips into a tortured half-grin. I knew I should respect the tarnished gold contact chevrons on his sleeve — but I couldn't accept a philosophy that went against all my training.

"Aren't we supposed to make friendly contact?"

Kettles took the pipe out of his mouth and spit into the dust. "You hear that back at fleet headquarters. Those stripers haven't left a hundred friends buried on a dozen worlds. Here on the edge we don't trust a wog with anything but a blaster in his guts." He stood up and waved his pipe. "Hurry up, Moko. Let's get this slop ready for the troops."

With a backward wave I strode across the charred dirt of the landing perimeter. From the lower edge I could see about a mile down into the valley, where two rivers met in a triangular flood plain. Black trees shot up to a hundred feet and then branched out like giant asparagus. Each twig ended in a

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black pod about the size of my fist. I took out the directional mike and tuned it on the trees. Through the speaker came the soft patter of pods in the breeze — then a crack! as one exploded into a cloud of silver parachutes. My heart thumped inside my chest. This world had never felt the tread of my race. I thought of the poisoned air of the Derelict Worlds, the starving crowds and the oily, shifting eyes of the claustrophobes on the Settled Planets, and I wondered how long it would take the grounders to make a nightmare of this one.

I focused my scanner on a large white pod wedged into the high fork of a tree. I sucked in my breath as a head popped out of the hole at its base. My first Brisalian! He — or it could have been she — had a long triangular face with two spiraling horns behind the eyes. Short fangs curved down from the long muzzle, and a wispy red beard hung beow its chin.

The creature slid out of the pod and crawled up the glossy trunk, and I saw that its toes and fingers had suction pads instead of calluses. A long tail looped over its head and curled around the higher branches. I watched the creature approach another pod, and another head popped out. This one lacked horns, but had a kinky mass of orange hair sprouting from its head. When the two started rubbing noses, I decided the bearded one was male and the mop-hair one female — not that it mattered when speaking of aliens. I turned up the light-gathering intensity of my scanner and counted thirty-two more pods, each with a face or two staring towards me.

A siren shrieked from the camp, and so I ran to get into formation with the rest of the specialist officers. They'd saved me a spot at left rear. You couldn't get any more junior than that. Still, I got a mist on my eyes when Captain Jorgen climbed onto a cargo sled and led us in a salute to the seven-starred flag of the Federation. He looked grim and heroic, with his platinum bars and herringbone of gold contact stripes, and the burn scar from Feehan's Raid, and the limp from the Mizar Action. I felt proud and slightly humble to be in his company.

"DISMISS!"

He jumped down off the sled and strode to his quarters. The engineering squad was pop-riveting panels and squirting sealant along the seams. I tapped on the door molding, and the commander looked up from pulling his boots off. "What is it, Lippy?"

"Sir, I want to go with the defense platoon tomorrow."

"Are you requesting transfer to the defense platoon?"

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"No, sir, I want to take language samplings—"

"Permission denied. Help me with this boot."

I grabbed the heel and pulled. "Sir, ever since the Alpheratz tragedy, regulations have stated that a language technician, under proper security, will make first contact with aliens with a view to implementing polite forms of greeting —"

The boot came off, and I reeled across the room. Captain Jorgen lifted his bare feet onto the desk and wiggled his toes. "You have a copy of those regs, Jaygee Coalsack?"

"Yes, sir." I pulled the booklet from my pocket and gave it to him.

"Hmmm, very interesting, yes, extremely so." He tore the booklet across the middle, then put the two pieces together and tore them again. "The only regulations which apply here are orders of the day signed by me. The only thing which can suspend those orders is a verbal command by me." He dumped the torn scraps of paper in my hand. "Dispose of that as you leave."

I saluted with my ears burning. As I started out, he called: "By the way, Lippy, what was the Alpheratz tragedy?"

I turned in the doorway. "A communications failure, sir. When Ship Commander Shinewart broadcast his intent to land and discharge wounded at the Alpheratzi spaceport, he got a reply which he understood to be a refusal. He opened fire on the control tower and was immediately brought down by automatic response missiles. The nearest arm of the escort fleet peeled off and skewered the planet with magnetic beams, stopping its rotation like a clock. Only after the Alpheratzi civilization had been destroyed was it learned that their negative tentacle configuration, when combined with a convergence of the grasping mandibles, threw the entire communication into a new symbol group —"

"Tell it in Terran."

"They said — yes and no."

He sighed. "Why can't you ever use simple terms, Lippy?"

"Because it's not simple. A 'yes' in Alpheratzi eighth-level symbol group is the same as 'no' in the fourth-level group, and so —"

He closed his eyes and fluttered his fingers. "Out."

I saluted and left. I guess I went looking for sympathy — anyway I found Moko sitting on the floor of the mess kitchen strumming his fourteen-stringed Gatroxan lute while the cook dumped concentrated gruel into a cauldron. Moko picked out a mournful accompaniment while I told him about my interview.

"I don't mind the way he calls

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me Lippy. After all, they call the geologists diggers. You're a gunner. I wouldn't care what he called me if he'd let me talk to those people."

"Wogs aren't people," grunted the cook, pouring a can of moisturizer into the gruel.

Moko stood up, dipping one shoulder as he slung the lute on his back. "Lippy, I can't fight your battles with the officers. Anybody my own rank, I smash him. But you deal with your own rank. That's the law of the contact service."

"I know. Just blowing off. When are you free?"

"Maybe never. After this I pull perimeter guard."

"Which shift."

"Graveyard. I got low card in the squad drawing."

That gave me an idea, but I couldn't say anything in front of Kettles. I went into my living cube, unstrapped my hammock and hooked it to the opposite wall, set my chrono to wake me at 2400, then lay down and started reciting the 17,000 conjugations of the verb 'to be' in Trygopyrian. It put me to sleep, as usual, and the next thing I knew a tingle in my wrist told me it was time to go. I put my pickups and recorders into a back pack and started walking around the perimeter. Brisali's seven moons hung like a pearl necklace across the plane of the ecliptic. I didn't have to see Moko's dark bulk to know where he was; I could hear the flat plunk-plunk of his lute as he strummed with his hand clamped across the bridge. I walked up and told him my plan.

"You've got grav shock," he said. "I had it once. Eight months in free fall, then I hit dirt and the blood drained outa my brain. I took off my boots and ran barefoot across the hot sulfur flat at Tubble's Landing. Got blisters big as weather balloons."

"My brain's okay. I'll just go down and stick some bugs on those trees."

"You'll get something stuck in you maybe — like a spear."

"In that case I'll know their weapon strength, right?"

I stepped onto the purple moss which grew outside the burn. It gave gently beneath my boots. As I walked, I felt the mass of the planet turning under my feet. It felt good. I guess I was a grounder at heart. I skirted a knee-high clump of jagged bayonets which glittered like frosted glass in the moonlight. I brushed against one and gasped as the point slid into my calf. I peeled up my trouser cuff and looked at the red ruby swelling out. *The first blood shed on Brisali's Planet was that of Lt. (J. G.) Myron Coalsack III, born seventeen Earth-years ago as the Survival Fleet passed the Deneb Sector* —

I heard Moko's hoarse whisper

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behind me. "Move on. I'll cover you."

His blaster gave me a sense of security as I moved on down the slope. The glass bayonets were easy to avoid in the moonlight — in fact, the moonlight was my biggest problem. Seven shadows bouncing off in seven different directions made it hard to judge the terrain.

The black forest loomed fifty yards away. I stopped, plugged in the mike and slipped on the headphones. Silence hung like a stilled pendulum. I inched forward to the edge of the trees and stopped, holding my breath. If a fly had scratched his nose, I would have heard it. But the forest was silent.

I peeled off the headphones and signaled Moko forward. "Can you climb a tree?"

"Help me off with these boots."

For the second time that day I played orderly. Moko went up the trunk like a measuring worm. Five minutes later he slid down to report that all the living pods were empty.

"Let's look for tracks."

We didn't even find any of the little footpaths you'd expect around a settlement. We decided they traveled through the trees that crowded the bank of the silent, slow-flowing river.

We'd been following it a mile when my headphone picked up a hollow *baroom ... baroom ...*

"Surf," said Moko.

"My instruments aren't that good. We're two thousand miles from the sea." I turned up the directional mike and panned the horizon. The sound came from a point at right angles to the river. I set the compass to give a bleep when we strayed off the route, and we started walking across a mossy plain. After a half mile I picked up a clattering, rattling sound. I took off the headphones and held them to Moko's ear.

"Lippy, that's music!"

"Sounds more like a barrel of rocks rolling downhill."

"We only get low notes at this distance. Let's get closer."

We trudged on. After another half mile I could see a wedge of rock thrusting out into the plain. The sound came from around the point. As we inched around the cliff, the boom-rattle was joined by a low, reedy wail, followed by a pure tinkling chime.

The directional mike told me it came from a patch of shadow halfway up the hundred-foot massif. Moko took off his belt and wrapped it around my wrist. He went ahead and pulled me up as I struggled to wedge my feet into the cracks. He reached the ledge first and dropped flat behind an asparagus trunk. When I edged up beside him, he gripped my shoulder and pulled me down, jabbing his

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finger. "There they are."

The tribe had gathered there on the broad terrace. In the center stood a cauldron which looked like one of their living pods cut in half. Blue fire flickered around its base, silhouetting the horned and mop-haired Brisali who stood facing away from us. Both males and females wore short togas of brown rough-woven cloth. Nearly all the females had babies slung in shawls which they tied over one shoulder.

Backed up against the cliff were four Brisali musicians. One was thumping a giant asparagus log with a long padded club. Another rattled a cluster of bladders like those I'd seen in the treetops. A third was blowing through a long reed, while the fourth tapped on a string of glass bayonets hung from an oval frame. The overhanging arch of the cliff amplified the sound to an almost deafening cacophony; had it been facing the opposite direction, I think it could have been heard from the camp.

Beneath all the percussion, I could hear a faint vocal note, like the wailing of wind through wires. It came from the spectators, many of whom were swaying to the music. I started fiddling with the selector dial, trying to bring up the vocal. I saw Moko stand up beside me and unsling his lute.

"No! They'll throw us off the cliff."

"You don't know musicians, Lippy."

His first note froze all movement in the natural amphitheater. His second turned all heads in our direction. By the time he got into the second chorus of "Coming into Port Zymbalese" all the Brisali were facing us. I felt relieved that no spears had been launched at us. It was even more reassuring to note that the Brisali looked even more harmless close up. Not one of them was more than three feet tall.

The last note bounced off the cliff and died. After a moment of silence, the Brisali turned toward each other and opened their mouths, sharp little fangs flashing in the blue firelight. There was a sudden chattering, clacking sound like a hundred teletypes going at full speed. This was what I'd come for. I turned on the recorder and hooked up the mikes. Just as I had it tuned in nicely, the conversation died. The Brisali band started a chattering rhythm on tree trunk, bladder and bayonet which had a vague resemblance to the tune Moko had played. Moko began twisting the stops on his lute, frowning and muttering to himself. Abruptly all the Brisali stopped playing except the one who played the boyonets. Lifting his little yellow rod, he tapped one of the shards. A clear, icy bell tone floated to my ears.

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"That's it!" said Moko. "See? He gave me the key."

The key. To Moko it was a sound; to me it had to be a word, a symbol bridge across two cultures. As Moko moved toward the musicians, I took my equipment and walked over to the cauldron. The horned adults grouped around the pot stopped click-clicking among themselves and formed a silent, staring circle around me. I caught a whiff of their body odor and nearly choked. It was a little like burning rubber.

I slapped my chest. "Lippy," I said.

They watched me with grave expressions in their large oval eyes. I did my chest-slapping number again. "Lippy."

After another repetition the tallest of the group — he came a little above my belt — stepped out and slapped his suction discs against the curling dun hair on his chest. His mouth opened. Out came a harsh rattle: "Yllck!"

I bent down and tried to see into his mouth, but I caught only a flash of needle-sharp fangs. He backed off and stared up at me through large brown eyes.

"Yllck, is it? Let's try another word." I reached down and grabbed a handful of purple soil. "Dirt," I said, holding out my hand. "Dirt!"

Yllck stepped forward and looked intently into my hand. "Dyllt!" he rattled. "Dyllt!"

He was doing his best to imitate me, but I wanted his own words. While I was trying to figure out a new approach, a little child pushed through the crowd — a boy, judging by the nubby horns sprouting behind his eyes. He tried to dip a hollow gourd into the cauldron, but he was too short. He tugged at Yllck's toga and said:

"Brrr-tch-kik-tch-kuk!"

This time I saw what happened inside his mouth: a slender pink tongue rolled back, and a flexible strip of bone vibrated against his palate.

Yllck, without taking his eyes off me, thrust the dipper into the cauldron and brought it up dripping a gray semitransparent fluid. The kid took it.

"Brrrr - tch - kik - tch - kuk!" I said. It was a blurred, mushy rendition of their rattle, but the best I could do without a sliver of bone in my mouth. One of the girls made snuffling sounds which I suspected was a giggle. I reached out and touched her dipper: "Brrr-tch-kik-tch-kuk."

Yllck turned to the crowd. "Brrp? Tik-sh?" They started brr-tch-kikking to each other. A few seconds later four brimming gourds were held out to me.

"Food," I said. "Burr-tch-kik-tch-kuk."

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Moko came up with his lute slung over one shoulder. "Maybe it doesn't mean food at all. Maybe it's a toast, like, 'Here's mud in your eye.'"

I shrugged; I had no time to explain how the language analogue worked. Once you got a phrase tied to an act, you had a base to build on. I said, "Here's mud in your eye," and lifted a gourd to my lips. It had no smell, but since I didn't know what the Brisali brew might do to my stomach, I passed it on to Moko. Not having my own cautious nature, he said, "Here's mud in your eye," and took a deep swallow. His eyes gleamed as he passed the gourd to Yllck.

"Ersmunurai," said Yllck, then drank and passed it on.

"Munurai - munurai - munurai ..." Each Brisali mouthed the phrase as the dipper passed from hand to hand.

"I don't get it," I said. "I thought they spoke in clicks."

Monko shrugged. "They sing in voice. Maybe they think you're singing."

He appeared to be right, for the little girls nearest the cauldron began filling dippers and passing them back through the crowd, chanting: "Munurai, munurai." One of the females began to sway rhythmically at the waist, and a half-dozen males hopped around her, first on one foot and then the other. The log pounder took up the beat, followed by the bladder shaker and the bayonet beater. Finally Moko unslung his lute and joined in.

Four choruses later, I got Moko off the ledge and started back. He'd swigged two more dippers of the brew but said he wasn't drunk — just calm and happy. I myself felt reasonably content; though I'd drunk no brew, I'd recorded fifteen minutes of click-conversation while mingling with the group.

We stopped at the edge of the woods and looked up at the camp. The little watch lights burned like diamonds; the ranked living cubes were stark white against the blackened dirt. All was silent; apparently we hadn't been missed.

As we climbed the slope, Moko said, "Haven't had so much fun since my furlough on Chronos. How about you?"

"Next time remind me to wear nose filters."

"You should've drunk some brew. It kills your sense of smell. But what I mean is — they were like kids at a picnic. I don't think they'd have hurt us, even if they could."

"Did you get a peep at those fangs?"

"Everybody's got teeth. Doesn't mean they'll bite your head off." He paused to shift the heavy blaster to his other shoulder. "Anyway,

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you're the one who wanted the peaceful approach — or did you change your mind?"

"No ... I just had a feeling they weren't as happy as they wanted us to think." Trying to explain, I realized I was going on pure intuition. "Forget it. I'll feel easier when I can speak their language."

I left him at his post and went to my cube, set the soundproofing, and fed the lead of my microtape into the language analog. While it clicked and hummed, I strung my hammock and tried to relax. I didn't realize I'd fallen asleep until the computer buzzed me awake. I ripped off the readout and saw: IMPOSS DECIPHER KLIKS WITHOUT KEY. I tried to think, rubbing my knuckles against my forehead. Time was 0300. At 0630 the sun would rise and the defense platoon would march on the Brisali — unless I could give Captain Jorgen a reason to delay.

I recalled a lecture in lang-tech school on the history of communication. At some time in the past, Terrans had communicated by clicks. They'd called it Morris Code or something.

I tapped out the message: INTERVALS BETWEEN KLIKS?

The computer hummed and queeped for an excruciating hour, then stuck out its white tongue. I read: WHAT MEANS TONE DIFFERENCE?

I couldn't remember any tone difference. I played the tapes on a setting that magnified the vertical profile of the conversation. I could hear the resonance of the clicks rise and fall. I remembered that the Brisali had opened their mouths wide when laughing or dancing, and nearly closed them when chatting quietly. I tapped back:

TONE SIGNIFIES EMOTION.

The machine settled into a low hum which lasted until 0530. Then it typed a single word: TEST.

I plugged in the mike and said, "Testing ... one-two-three-four."

After a long silence, the machine clicked:

"Brrt ... cut-ukut." A pause, then a readout: LACK ANALOG FOR "TESTING" AND "FOUR".

It wasn't much, but it would have to do. I started to push back my door panel and nearly sprained my wrist. The door was jammed. I kicked, pried and heaved for a minute until I remembered that my cube was hooked into the intercom system. I punched out the headquarters number. A message blinked red on my screen:

OCCUPANT OF THIS CUBICLE HAS BEEN PLACED UNDER MAXIMUM DETENTION PENDING COURTS - MARTIAL. ALL OUTSIDE COMMUNICATION FORBIDDEN.

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I stood numb for a minute, paralyzed by a vision of my bars being torn off and myself driven from the service in disgrace. I realized that our expedition had been discovered, and I hope that Moko hadn't been caught — but I knew better than to expect it.

I started pacing my cube, one step forward, about-face and one step back. That was all the room I had. Every few minutes I tried the door and the message screen, each time with the same negative result. By 0700 my fists were clenched in seething rage. Captain Jorgen was trying to silence me while he did his dirty number on the Brisali. The chrono ticked 0730, and I pictured flamethrowers in the trees, the little bodies coming down in smoke.

At 0800 the door slid back — but a force field shimmered across the opening. Through it I saw the wavering faces of the commander, the geology officer, and the chemistry officer. Captain Jorgen looked ten feet tall and grim as granite.

"Jaygee Coalsack, you are charged with four counts of disobedience. One, leaving camp without permission. Two, consorting with uncleared natives. Three, partaking of untested foods. Four, wrongful use of equipment. How do you plead?"

"Sir, the reason I did it —"

"Extenuating circumstances will be heard later. Do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

"Sir, I did visit the Brisali, but it was worth —"

"Defendant pleads guilty. Board will now hear extenuating circumstances."

Instead of answering, I took the mike from the analog and held it up to the force field. The commander gave me a boiled look. "Are you out of your mind, Coalsack?"

He jumped as the speaker chattered: "Bktuch-chrr-bpklsck!"

I reached back and shut it off. "You're speaking Brisali, sir. That's why I went out last night." His expression remained grim, and I felt the first tremor of panic. "It's a simple but subtle language. They can make exactly the same clicks and make them mean a different thing according to the tone. For example, 'I'm hungry.' That's basic. Adding a high tone, you get: I'm hungry — and sad because I have nothing to eat. A middle tone gives you: I'm hungry, and puzzled because you offer me drink instead. A low tone means: I'm hungry! — and about to bite into a hunk of meant —"

He chopped me off with his hand. "Coalsack, you are sentenced to cube confinement for three days, restricted to landing perimeter for thirty day, and forfeiture of pay for a like period. Do you accept this

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judgment, or do you exercise your right of appeal?"

I swallowed a hot lump. "Sir — what happens if I appeal?"

"You will be confined until we leave the planet, then returned to fleet headquarters to be tried by a commission of flag-ranking officers."

"Sir — I accept. But I want you to take this analog and at least talk to the natives ..."

"That won't be necessary."

"You've already killed them!"

He laughed — strangely — as the door slid shut in my face.

My concern for the Brisali faded as my own predicament absorbed my full capacity for grief. I wept few tears, since there was nobody to see or care. I spent the first eight hours pacing, the second eight sitting with my knees drawn up to my chest. Every eight hours a slot opened to reveal a cup of unflavored glucose gruel sitting in the niche. Since it contained a moisturizer, there was never any water. The Trygopyrian conjugations were all that saved my sanity. I'd gotten up to 13,470 when the doorlatch clicked and the screen flashed:

DETENTION ENDS
DETENTION ENDS
DETENTION ENDS

I wasn't exactly released. I was hatched, like a tender chick, into the babble-crash-whistle-beep of a military camp — but what a camp! It had been transformed into a glittering fairyland. Gone were the geometric patterns of duralium cubes. Delicate arches of white supported domes of transparent substance. Colored walkways wound among the quarters of the enlisted men. The sandbagged dugout of the defense platoon had become a miniature Taj Mahal, and seven little Brisali folk were digging what looked like a reflecting pool in front of it. The mess hall looked like a gigantic wedding cake held up by fluted pillars. In front of it I saw Kettles reclining in a weblike hammock while one of the Brisali females peeled a large purple fruit and broke it into bite-sized sections. And off to the left — to prove that it was the same old company — saw my friend Moko digging a pit. Only his head and shoulders were visible. I could see dark stripes on his sleeves where his rank had once been sewn.

"You too," I said. "What happened?"

He lowered his shovel and leaned back against the side of the pit. "I always said, it isn't your enemies that do you in, it's your friends. The Brissy came to camp next morning with gifts of food and liquor. Wanted to give them to us, because we'd entertained them."

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"How'd the commander know it was us?"

"Remember Yllck? He described us."

"But — how'd he communicate?"

"In Terran. They all spoke Terran."

An icy chill slid down my back. I gazed around and saw Brissy everywhere, washing windows, raking pathways, building more little domes. They'd taken their little beehive pods out of the trees and moved them to a spot less than a hundred yards from camp. I saw a dozen females washing clothes in the river, their little togas pinned up around their hips and their long tails arched over their heads. I stopped a male who was leaving the camp with a bundle of uniforms tied on his back.

"Why do you work for us?"

He grinned, revealing the needle points of his fangs. "You alltime happy folk, alltime sing. Brissy-folk love sing-song."

I led him to my cube and wheeled out the language analog. "You speak Brissy-talk, okay?"

He drew back shaking his head. "Brissy-click nogood. Me click Terran. You like bootashine? Laundry? My sister wash verry quick, verry clean ..."

I let him go and tried two others, with the same result.

I left them and went to see the commander. He was congenial, friendly — not himself at all. He was watching the Brissy at work on a sports stadium modeled after the coliseum on Chronos. One was stirring a white soupy substance in a cauldron. I watched him dip it out and pour it along the top of a wall, where it immediately congealed into putty. Another worker shaped it with his hands. I kicked a section of the wall which a minute before had been soup. It rang like high-tensile duralium.

"Light as sea foam," said the commander. "The same stuff they make their living pods out of."

"How do they make it, sir?"

He pointed to a crew of Brissy breaking down a clump of glass bayonets with long poles. They raked it into a pile and forked it into the pots. When it was boiling, they threw in clumps of red berries, and the cauldron started to steam and pop.

I walked to where the commander sat in a form-fitting seat made of the magic material. On the table sat a flagon and a half-filled glass of the Brissy brew. He lifted the flagon and raised his brows, but I shook my head.

"Don't worry," he said. "It's been analyzed by our medics. Entirely harmless. Makes you feel good." He laughed, and I felt a vague premonition of disaster.

"Sir, the natives speak Terran."

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"That's as it should be."

"But there's only one way they could have learned it so soon. They've got a language analog."

He lifted his feet onto the table and smiled. "You techs always think you hold the only key to the universe. Obviously the Briss have a shortcut."

"In which case it should work both ways. I could learn their language the same way."

"Learn it then. Permission granted." He poured out another glass of brew. "But you'll have to do it on your own time. We don't really need a lang-tech now, and so I've made you supernumerary."

My ears burned. "What does that mean, sir?"

"Means you fill in where you're needed. First job is to find out why the troops won't eat their gruel."

The troops weren't eating their gruel because it was unappetizing slop. They drew their rations as required and dumped them into a pit, then went into the new mess hall and lounged on contour couches while Brissy girls passed among them with bowls of native fruit. I sampled enough to know that they were delicious. There was a large purple melon which could be scooped out and served as an omelet. A grayish lemon, when roasted, tasted like the white meat of a chicken. Red berries fried in deep fat came out with the flavor of deep-sea scallops. A coconutlike fruit could be husked, baked and sliced like cured ham.

I asked Kettles, "Do the Brissy eat the same fruit?"

"Oh, sure."

"No meat?"

"Isn't any. No animals, birds, not even bugs."

"Then why do the Briss have such sharp teeth?"

He shrugged, a gesture of indifference which seemed to afflict the entire camp. I found Moko sprawled in a gossamer hammock strumming his lute. He lifted a cup of the Brissy brew.

"Drink up. Forget your worries."

"What if there's something to worry about?"

"What? Air's clean. Food's good. The natives think we're gods. Enjoy paradise while you can. In six months we may be fighting poisonous centipedes."

I couldn't enjoy. I spent a sleepless night in my cube and finally decided to let the rest of the company drift into lethargy — since I couldn't stop them anyway — and just concentrate on doing my own job.

Next morning I asked Captain Jorgen if I could check out an atmospheric flier. "There's another tribe about fifty miles away. I want to study the Briss in their own habitat. Learn their language and

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customs. The way it is, they're learning all about us and we're learning nothing about them."

He scowled. "You'd need a hookup to the camp computer to run that analog of yours. I can't justify it, since we're already communicating."

"On their terms."

"*Friendly* terms. You'd better appreciate that. If these wogs had been classified hostile, your friend Moko would have been shot for leaving his post."

I felt a retrospective chill. "Sir, I don't think they're hostile. I just want to find out why they're so friendly."

"What do you mean?"

"Like ... we sit here slurping their brew and letting them do our work. Captain Kutzman even has the Brissy drilling core samples while the geology crew makes necklaces out of dried berries. What if we're being slowly put to sleep while the Briss wrap us in a lovely shimmering web?"

Captain Jorgen tapped his finger impatiently. "Proof?"

"No, but if you'll let me take that flyer —"

He shook his head. "You're still restricted to the area, Coalsack. Until you prove a clear danger — that's the way it stands. Dismissed."

I saluted and started out. He said:

"Coalsack, I've looked into your record. You got your bars about two years ahead of time because you solved the Subris phoneme. Now, I don't know what that means..."

"Sir, the Subri used a system of color signals conveyed by chemical action upon the sclerotic layer of the eye—"

"All right. All right. I don't doubt you're a genius. The point is, the Subri were already pacified. What I'm getting at, you haven't been blooded. These men here ... let's take the diggers. You criticize old Kutz for letting his men goof off. The last place he touched down, they had to fight off hostiles while they dug out core samples. If Kutz wanted to wear all his citations, he'd need an extra shirt. Now and then we get soft duty like this. We take it when it comes. When you've traded fire alongside these men, you'll have a different attitude. Don't criticize them for taking it easy. They've earned a rest. You haven't. Dismissed."

I went out with my ears burning. It had been a total communications failure. The captain had thought I was criticizing, whereas I had just wanted to call attention to the fact that we weren't doing our job.

"I guess that isn't the same thing," said Moko.

"It *isn't* — well, maybe it is. But

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I'm not doing my job any better. I've got to collect enough words to build up a dictionary of the Briss language. Otherwise I'm sure to be reprimanded by the Corps of Linguists. That, combined with my detention, means I'll probably lose my rating. But I can't leave the camp — and the Briss won't speak anything but pidgin Terran while I'm around. They won't even talk Briss into my mike."

"Why don't you pay them?"

"With what? They don't use money. They've got plenty of food. Place to live. What can I offer them?"

Moko shrugged and lay back in his hammock, picking his lute. The Briss workers nearby put down their tools and turned to listen — and that gave me the idea.

I spent my next sleep period working in the equipment shop. By dawn I was gritty-eyed, but I'd combined two of my basic items of equipment — a microtape player good for forty hours and an audio pickup which beamed conversation directly into my language analog. I boxed the works into a heartshaped amulet with the Federation emblem done in synthetic sapphire on the front. Then I searched among the Briss workers until I found Yllck. He was fashioning a fountain in the shape of an asparagus tree.

His eyes gleamed as the Fomalhaut overture drifted into the air. But he looked wary when I put the amulet in his hand.

"What for you giving this me?"

"I want to learn your language. This will send your words to my machine."

"Briss-click ugly. Terran much more better. We 'shame to speak Briss-click where you hear."

"Shame has no place between friends."

"What ... is friends?"

"People who give things to each other. I give you music. You give me words. That's friendship."

He ran the cord of the amulet between his fingers for a minute, then put it around his neck. I held out my hand. "Friend."

He clasped mine, a strange feeling. "Friend," he said.

"Say it in Briss."

"Tk-chi-kuk-kuk."

When I got back to my language analog, I checked out the root of the word. It meant: "One - who - does - not - eat - you." Obviously my vocabulary was still too slim for accurate definition. Either that, or the Briss had a weird history.

Another strangeness turned up the next day. The root word for "mother" and "father" in Briss was: "Those - who - have - gone - away." I sought out Yllck and asked if he had any children. He brought me a tiny girl who sat in my palm.

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"Her mother?" I asked.

"Gone away. The night you come, we made sing-song for her."

"Where'd she go?"

He looked down, but not before I saw a haunted look in his eyes. "Gone away. Not return. No ask where."

I told the story to Moko, and he wrote a song called "The Last Walk." The Briss cried when he sang it for them. Later he told me why.

"It's like they reach a certain age, and it's good-by to everything. They're not sick, they just ... gotta *go*. Nobody knows where they go, because they're afraid to follow. It's like on Old Terra, they had an animal called the elephant. When he got old, he went off by himself to die."

"But Yllck's wife was only seventeen!"

Moko shrugged. "They got a short life span."

I wasn't satisfied with the answer. "Listen, if you hear of anybody getting ready to wander off, let me know and I'll follow."

Moko agreed, and I went back to my analog. Thanks to the amulet around Yllck's neck, I had 8,000 words of Briss — enough to start constructing a dictionary.

I soundproofed my cube and started to work. I had to make a double-track tape, so that when you spoke Terran into one end, it came out the other in Brissy. The tapes, under normal procedure, were copied and handed out to every colonist who had contact with natives. This was a Language Corps strategy to substitute peaceful penetration for the blast-and-burn routine of the old-timers. So far, it had few adherents.

By the time I got down to D, a chill was sliding up my back. *The Briss had no word for death.*

Did that mean they were immortal? As I worked down the alphabet, I began to realize it was something else, something so strange and frightening that I couldn't even tell Moko until I had proof.

I stepped outside for some fresh air. At that moment a speaker blared from the headquarters palace: "ALL OFFICERS REPORT TO HEADQUARTERS IMMEDIATELY. ALL OFFICERS —!"

I started running, passing Kutzman the geology officer who was puffing along, pulling on his shirt. Captain Jorgen looked grimmer than I'd ever seen him. "Gentlemen! When we landed here, I assumed we'd have six months before the colonists arrived. I've just gotten a message relayed from the sentinel ship. They'll be here in three days."

There was some muttering and foot shuffling among the group,

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then the chemistry officer asked, "What happened? The fleet was supposed to drop colonists at Andros Cluster before they came here."

"Some kind of deadly bacteria that wasn't discovered until they'd thawed out the colonists. That's one hundred thousand people. They've got no facilities to refreeze. If they can't land here, they'll have to go back to Formidan, and that means cutting rations. Probably half will starve." He paused and looked around. "Kutz, you're senior specialist. What's your opinion? Is the planet safe? Are the natives friendly?"

Captain Kutzman scratched his shaggy white eyebrows, pulled his lower lip, then rubbed his right ear, which had the shape of a dried apricot. Finally he grunted: "They aren't giving *me* any trouble."

Jorgen scowled as he unfolded a map. "I've been studying your site map. You've drilled all around the camp, except this area here." He drew his finger along a line leading toward the river. "Why not?"

"It's some kind of tabu. The Briss won't dig there."

"When did you start observing native tabus?"

Kutz shifted his feet. "Since Ullman, Cap'n. They killed a couple of tool pushers when we drilled on sacred soil. Said we were disturbing their ancestors."

"You think the Briss would fight if you dug there?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Then you don't know if they're peaceful or not." He glared around the group. "Who else has an opinion? Coalsack, you're twitching. What is it?"

"Sir — I think they're peaceful. But only because they've been pacified."

The captain regarded me as if I were something that had crawled out of his salad. "That's the kind of confused answer I expected out of you. Perhaps you'd like to explain it."

"Well, sir —" I felt shy now that the older officers were listening. "A race reveals itself in its language — not so much by what it says, but by the common roots that words share. You can tell a male-dominated society, such as ancient English, since the word for the race is 'man' or 'mankind' or hu-man. You see how the root is male. Even the name of the opposite sex is fe-male. Now take the Briss. A peaceful people? Not so, judging from their language. The symbol for war appears three hundred times as often as the word for love. The word for food is the same as the word for meat — yet the Briss are vegetarians. Their word for the bayonet plant is 'food-slayer.' And — this is important — their word for

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foreigner has the same root as the word for food. Technically, it means 'food-from-another-tribe.' Add to that the fact that 'friend' means 'one-who-does-not-eat-you." What do you get? The Briss were cannibals."

There was a moment's silence. I was dismayed to see that they were polite, attentive — and no more. Then the captain sighed. "I can't see your point, Coalsack. Some of our ancestors were cannibals too. That doesn't mean we're savages."

"No, but the Brisali stopped eating meat so suddenly —"

"How suddenly?"

I was floundering for an answer; then the archaeologist cleared his throat. "I think I can answer that. We've been doing stratigraphic excavation down under those trees. We found the remains of stone houses and all kinds of animal bones. One was a carnivore about eight feet long, mixed with the glass bayonets. Apparently they fitted the bayonets onto a shaft and used them as spears. They hunted this carnivore, and were in turn hunted by it. But now this carnivore is extinct, am I right, Roger?"

The ecologist nodded. "There's not a single living creature on the planet except the micro-organisms necessary for decay of matter — and of course the Briss."

"That's something to look into," said the archaeologist. "We also found evidence that the Briss used to be much more numerous than now. Something like 8,000 persons lived in this valley. They had tribal wars, and they ate their captives. We found remnants of gnawed Brisali bones as far back as we've traced, which is about twelve hundred years. But about five hundred years ago they stopped eating each other — suddenly."

"Is that unusual?" asked the commander.

"Unusual, but not unique. On ancient Terra many tribes practiced cannibalism — until they were conquered by a civilization that had a prejudice against anthropophagy. In one case it was the European culture which spread all over the world during the latter half of the second millennium..."

"The Briss aren't cannibals now?" asked the commander.

"No."

The biologist coughed loudly. "I think that's open to question, Sam, until we know what they actually do with their dead."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, normally we find a dead body to cut up. Not here. We did hear of a child who'd fallen off a cliff and broke her neck, but when our crew arrived the body was gone. Nobody would say what had happened. Perhaps she was eaten. In any case we've found no

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graveyards or burial grounds."

I started to tell about their custom of wandering off, but the chemistry officer asked a question: "How long ago did they start making those beehive huts they carry on their backs?"

"Five hundred years ago — the same time they quit eating each other."

"Well, that may be coincidence. But our group noticed that the berries always grew near the glass bayonets. Nothing in the soil would prevent its growing anywhere between here and another clump ten miles away. Then there's the chemistry of the plants themselves. I'll use an analogy, say the male and female of the human species. They're engineered so that they ... uh, fit together." (Laughter) "But they aren't ... together all the time." (More laughter) "Takes something to make them come together. Love, or what-have-you."

The laughter swelled to a roar. The captain interrupted: "We're all had our furlough on Chronos. Go on, Captain Sutter."

"Very well. The berries and the bayonets are — that is, their chemical structure is such that they bond to form a compound, which happens to be a strong lightweight building material. They don't bond, however, until heat is applied. Those asparagus trees won't burn, by the way. But the soil burns — and only in the narrow strips which separate the berries from the bayonets. It's as if some ... superbotanist or superchemist had introduced the berries and laid down the soil deposits just so the Brisali could build houses."

"Swords into plowshares," I said.

Everybody looked at me again. "What does that mean, Coalsack?" asked the commander.

"Just an ancient Terran legend. The gods came down from the sky and gave man fire, taught them to beat their swords into plowshares and live in peace."

"Did they?"

"For a while — until population pressure got too high."

"That's another thing," said the ecologist. "The Briss have a high birth rate, no disease, no predators, no wars. There's ten times as much food as they need. There's no reason why they shouldn't double their population every ten years — but they don't."

"Some sort of non-Malthusian check, you mean?"

"Yes — but I can't imagine what it is."

"We'd better find it before we let those colonists land," said the commander. "Otherwise they may run into the same check."

"Uh ... let me ask a question of Lieutenant Coalsack." It was the ecologist, and I tried to look

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attentive. "Is there anything in the language which indicates a natural disaster five hundred years ago? Something that nearly wiped out the race and which might recur at regular intervals?"

"I know of nothing, sir. But I'm not the mythology expert."

That brought a chuckle, and someone asked, "Do we have a mythologist in the company?"

"My friend Moko ... he makes songs out of their mythology."

"Gunner Moko? The lute player?"

"That's him."

The call went out over the speaker. Moko showed up panting, shirtless, with a half-eaten fruit in one hand and his lute on his shoulder.

"Stand at ease, Gunner Moko. This gentlemen has a question."

The ecologist asked the same question he'd asked me. Moko shook his head. "There's nothing in their mythology about disaster, sir. They sing about love, about nature."

"Strange. I was under the impression that most races had legends about their origin."

"Sir, they have a legend, but I'm not sure I can explain it. I was telling my friend Yllck about a superstition they had back on Old Terra. Assuming that man was the perfect creature, then all others, the birds and the beasts, were all developing toward that state. Yllck got very excited. He said his people believed the same thing. That we were the ideal, and the Briss were evolving toward us. But they couldn't make it in this life; so they had to die and be reborn."

"You mean they think we're gods?"

"Actually that we are their original masters, come from the sky to save them from an evil fate."

"The same old legend we keep running into," said Captain Sutter.

"What evil fate?"

"He wouldn't say, sir. I asked, but he wouldn't tell."

At that point the captain broke off the conference. The geologist had to drill in the forbidden area, the biologist had to locate a body — everybody had work to do. "And we've only got two days to do it. I would suggest we cut down on our food and drink. We're all about twenty pounds overweight — myself included. Dismissed. Lippy, stick around a minute."

If I expected compliments, I was wrong.

"Lippy, I'm taking you off restriction."

"Thank you, sir."

"And I'm attaching you to the digger crew."

"But I'm a linguist!"

"So now you learn the language of drill cores." His face seemed to soften, if you could imagine granite

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turning soft. "I have to find out why the Briss won't drill in those areas. Kutz is getting near retirement; I don't want him falling down on his last job. You go in and take some of the load. Do a good job, and I'll wipe that detention off your record."

Put that way, it didn't sound like bad duty. I helped the drillers line up their rigs 500 yards apart between the camp and the river. The crews knew their jobs; I only kept records as the drills chewed their way down. The profile was no different than in any other spot around the camp: sediment and alluvial gravel, then limestone cap rock overlying the purple bassalt that formed the planet's mantle. It was literally a grind for the first 15 hours;Kutzman went to his bunk, and I stayed on. About dawn the driller started pulling up pipe. "She's not moving!" he explained.

The bit had been worn as smooth as the lip of a glass.

"Never had anything stop this bit before," said the driller. "Better rouse Cap'n Kutz."

By the time I got back to the site with Kutz, the other two drills had stopped. An impervious surface had been struck at approximately 800 feet. Captain Kutz strode from one drill to the other pulling at his lower lip. Then he walked up to me. "What do you think we ought to do?"

I hadn't expected the question. "What do you usually do in a case like this?"

"Never had one. Those drills are made of Borazon 34. That's maybe fifty times harder than diamond."

The implications chilled me. "You mean we've hit a synthetic metal?"

"Call it synthetic if you want. It's harder than anything we've got." He frowned. "Must be anyway a thousand yards long, probably longer." He looked at me, and I knew the same thought had bounced into our minds: *Spaceship.*

"What's it doing 800 feet down?"

"We'd better get Captain Jorgen."

The commander wasted no time pacing. "How long will it take to ream out these holes to a hundred millimeters?"

"About ... oh, three hours."

"Do it. Then we'll shoot it armor-piercing rockets. If it turns something that'll go through eight inches of titanium..." He shrugged and left the sentence hanging. "Better concentrate on just one hole. It'll go quicker."

Reaming out was simple; the problem was getting rid of tons of material. I ran a hose to the river and pumped water to carry off the waste. Up to my hips in muck, I

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was only vaguely aware of the action up at the camp: whistles blowing, men running, panels of titanium armor going up around the perimeter....

We were a hundred feet from the bottom of the hole when the corporal in charge of Moko's squad came down wearing a combat harness hung with grenades and flechette rockets. He called me aside and asked if I'd seen Moko.

"Not since yesterday," I said.

"Well, he missed one formation — but I covered for him. You might know we're on yellow alert, and the top says we'll probably go into a combat situation. If he's absent then ... you know the regs."

I did. *Any man who wilfully absents himself from his unit during combat action will, if found guilty, suffer death.* I could only assume that Moko didn't know of recent events.

I left the drilling site and walked down to the Briss village. They were squatting in front of their huts, watching the camp with absolutely blank expressions.

"Has anyone seen Moko?"

Several shook their heads dumbly. I looked in vain for the familiar face of Yllck. "Where's Yllck?"

Their faces assumed a look of resignation. "Him taking walk."

My head sank. "The walk of no return?"

"Ee-yuss."

That led me to only one conclusion: Moko had followed him.

None of the Briss could say which way Yllck had gone. I was debating the idea of taking out a flier when I remembered the amulet around Yllck's neck. I ran to my cube and hooked a direction finder to the analog. The dial showed a blip about a mile beyond the fork in the river. It moved at the speed of a walk. I plugged in the speaker and heard the shuff-shuff of footsteps. After a few minutes, I heard Moko's distant shout:

"Wait, Yllck! I'll walk with you."

Yllck answered in a flat, robotlike tone. *"You must not come. It is forbidden."*

Moko's voice rose higher: *"You're going like a lamb to slaughter!"*

"It is ... how do you say — destiny? We eat drink love — then die. If I do not go the Gorm will kill all, boy-Briss, girl-Briss. Babies too."

"Who are the Gorm?"

"They are ... the Gorm. Masters."

The voices lost their stress, and I pictured them standing, talking together. *"We'll take care of the Gorm, if you show us where they are."*

"Ah ... cannot do. If Gorm die,

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the Brissy go back to evil ways, killing and eating each other. It is in the covenant the elders of our race made long ago."

"Your elders made a bad deal, Yllck. Break it."

"You speak true. Bad deal. But not true that we can break it. The Gorm take care of us too long. We are weak, fat, lazy. We no longer know how to fight."

"We'll teach you, Yllck, if you'll just —"

BARROOM! An explosion shook the ground, the screen tilted and went blank. I ran outside and saw a geyser of smoke, sand and rock spewing up from the drilling site. Rocks began to clatter down on the domes around me. I ducked back inside my cube and pulled on my titanium hardhat. When I stepped out, two mud-crusted diggers were coming into camp lugging a pair of magnetic tongs between them. They seemed to be straining under a heavy load, but I couldn't see what they carred.

I saw Kutz behind them, his white eyes rimmed with purple muck. "Did the rocket break through?"

"Naw. Only chipped it. Boys, lay it on this rock."

A crowd gathered as the two released the magnetic clamps of the tongs. I glimpsed a pea-sized chunk of incredibly black substance. For a split second it seemed to melt into the rock. Then the rock started to sink into the ground. There was a crack! as the rock exploded into three fragments. I stared at the wisp of smoke curling up from the hole where the black pea had disappeared. I heard the physicist's awed voice:

"Collapsed matter. Nothing else could be that dense."

"But I thought ..." I couldn't see who was speaking. "It was always assumed that only a collapsing star could achieve this effect."

"But here it is," said the physicist. "We'll have to assume that someone ... something ... has managed to produce the intense pressure and heat necessary to collapse the atomic structure of matter. That's considerably beyond our science at the moment."

The commander turned to the communications tech: "Call down the sentinel ship. We'll evacuate the planet in one hour. Then we'll see if space cannon will blow a hole in that stuff."

I ran back to my cube. The screen was still dead, but the speaker beamed the harsh rattle of heavy breathing. I put on my helmet and combat harness, buckled my belt blaster and slipped out. Everyone was too busy breaking camp to see me go. As I loped through the trees, I saw the Briss filing down the left bank of

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the stream with their little beehive huts on their backs. I took the right bank and crossed the mossy plain, rounding the massif of rock where we'd found the Briss the first night.

Moko was sitting up, sopping the blood which oozed from a three-inch gash in his scalp. His shirt and pants were torn.

"Yllck ... warned me not to follow," he grunted as I got a syrette out of my first-aid pouch and shot him with painkiller. "Said there was no point in both of us dying. He got up the cliff first and pushed rocks down on me."

He began to breathe easier, and I saw the taut lines of pain fade from around his eyes. I told him to wait while I climbed up to see where Yllck had gone. He refused, and climbed the cliff without help. At the back of the natural amphitheater we found a hole about two feet high. I dropped to my elbows and crawled in, fighting back the smothering awareness of tons of rock closing in on me. A rancid smell of decay drifted to my nose. I flashed my beam down a narrow sloping tunnel and felt a shiver of fear. I called over my shoulder: "They'll evacuate the planet in a half hour. If you run, you can make it."

His hand closed like a vise on my ankle. "If I go back, you're going with me."

The tone of his voice told me argument would be a waste of time. I didn't want to be stranded on the planet, and yet ... a vision of the escort fleet destroying the Briss and their secret in a single planetary holocaust was a tragedy which made my own life seem small.

I squeezed past a jutting rock worn glassy by the pasage of many bodies. The pitch of the tunnel steepened; I lost traction and slid for several yards, bracing myself to a stop just as Moko smashed into my legs and knocked me loose again. We tumbled, slid, rolled and scraped for what seemed like minutes; when we came to rest again, the tunnel had swelled into an ovoid tube about twelve feet high. The smell had grown to a gagging stench, and so I put on my breathing mask. Moko did the same.

Our boots made dead clunking sounds on the curving floor. The arching roof was so black it swallowed the light from my beam. I knew I'd seen it someplace before. It was like the chunk of compressed matter that the diggers had brought up.

"Not a spaceship at all," I said.

"What isn't?"

I told him about the barrier the drillers had struck. I started to mention that the leftward curve of the tube was bringing us back under the camp — when a muffled click sounded behind me. I whirled

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and saw that a tight-woven lattice had closed off the tunnel behind. I felt a rush of claustrophobic terror. I jerked out my blaster and fired at the grid, discharging my battery in a long crackling bolt of energy. The black lattice sucked it up like a blotter. I felt lightheaded.

"Said the spider to the fly," I said.

"We're in the parlor now," said Moko. "Let's see what's in the kitchen."

Still feeling a dreamy sense of awe at my own courage, I walked with blaster drawn beside Moko. After a few minutes I pulled off my breathing mask, but the stench was so fetid that my throat closed like a book. I clapped on the mask again. Far ahead I saw something shimmering across the corridor. It looked like the rippling surface of a pond, except that it stood vertically. Behind it stood the shadowy figures of five Briss. Four were swollen to an unbelievable degree of fat, soft obesity. The fifth was Yllck....

"Stop! Not coming closer, or you not going back."

Moko thrust the tip of his blaster through the screen, then tried to jerk it back. It vibrated in his hands for a second, then the tip of the barrel dropped to the floor. Moko stared at the sheared end of his blaster, shiny as a mirror. "Never saw a one-way force field before."

"You should not be here," said Yllck, his voice blurred by the energy field. "You not bound by covenant."

"We are now," said Moko. "They slammed the gate on us."

I looked at my chrono and broke into a sweat. The ship would take off in ten minutes. What would happen when atomic space cannon were fired into the tunnel? We couldn't be more than a half mile from the camp. If the force field held — and I had a feeling it would — the Briss would spatter against it like rotten fruit thrown against a window.

Yllck was speaking in rapid clicks to one of the girl-Briss. Her face was pretty, despite the roll of fat which puffed out from beneath her chin. Her pudgy arms were held akimbo by the swollen girth of her waist.

"This my wife, Mksl. She speaking only Briss click."

Behind them I could see the faint outline of another grille. "What lies beyond that?"

Yllck rolled his eyes. "The Gorm. When he hungry, he take fattest."

My scalp drew tight. Moko gasped. "The Gorm *eats* you?"

Yllck nodded. "'As it has always been, so it will always be.' That is our song of departure, telling how Gorm come down from sky, find many, many Briss. Eat.

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Grow. Spread all over. When finish almost all life, him sleep until more life grow. Awake only to eat maybe one-two-three Briss each ripening time."

"And you don't fight?"

"We can do nothing, for the Gorm know our thoughts. When you come to our sing-song, we think, here come man to save us, as our legend say. But Gorm put us all to sleep. We wake up, can speak Terran click. The Gorm wish food, more food. He wish to eat you now, for years he starve, but saying, wait, more people come. He find this in your mind. So he tell us, give you to drink, and to eat, and make you happy until grounders come. Then Gorm eat all, all..."

Moko turned pale. "What an appetite! A hundred thousand colonists."

"How does the Gorm talk to you?" I asked.

"Never seeing Gorm. Always sleep, wake up, we know the Gorm have speak to us, because we know what we must do."

"Sleep conditioning," I told Moko. "The Gorm must have learned Terran through a language analog, then fed it into the Briss. They were hypnotized to come to our camp, just as they're hypnotized to come here when they reached physical maturity. They can't help—"

I broke off as a ropy slate-colored tentacle moved out of the darkness behind the grille. It was a foot thick, tapering to a flexible gray-white tip. It flowed up the lattice and spread out over the latch. I saw threadlike filaments slide out and penetrate the lock. A gate about two feet square slid open. The tentacle oozed in and touched the butterfat leg of a male Briss. He bulged his eyes, but didn't move. Suddenly the tentacle lashed around his waist. A short scream ripped the air. Then came a squishy crackle, like a cockroach being stepped on. The Briss, nearly pinched in two, was dragged through the opening, leaving behind a trail of smeared blood.

The surviving Briss had flattened themselves against the wall, their eyes wide and unfocused. I looked at Moko, noting the green pallor around his mouth. "Yllck said it always takes two or three. When it comes back you fire—"

I stopped as the tentacle reappeared. What sort of sensing mechanism it used I don't know, but it went unerringly to Yllck's wife and spiraled around her thigh, jerking her off her feet. She lay with her jaws gaping open, the little silver of bone in the roof of her mouth going "kuk-kuk-kuk—"

Moko fired his blaster, but the energy burst hit the screen and bloomed like a gigantic red-and-yellow flower. Nothing penetrated.

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I saw the tentacle make another loop around Mksl's waist. I leaped through the screen and played my blaster on the appendage where it came through the opening. It writhed, crackled, looped and then fell apart, spraying a purple-black fluid that smelled like the ooze from a sewer....

It thumped against the floor like a headless snake, spraying its noxious ink all over my face and eyes. I caught a blurred glimpse of another tentacle gliding in as swiftly and silently as flowing mercury. I heard Moko shout, then my arm was seized above the elbow. I felt the flesh go and then the bone and then ... a sudden lightness of the right shoulder.

My forearm lay on the floor still gripping the blaster. I gazed down at the spurting stump of my right elbow.

The horror was brief, for the tentacle whipped around my chest and collapsed my lungs like a stepped-on cream puff. My ribs crackled like a string of exploding firecrackers, and my brain flared into a sheet of red. I felt myself dragged through the too-small opening, jerked with a force that ripped the flesh off my shoulders. I tried to scream, but the blood filled my mouth....

Still my eyes functioned — too well. The tunnel was bathed in dark-green luminescence. The stench was a physical weight in the air. I was dragged over heaps of bones, slime-green with moss. I saw a tunnel no longer black, but now a pinkness striated with red. From a pool of green ooze rose teeth like jagged trees as tall as a man. Around the mouth looped hundreds of warty purpled tentacles, some short, others long. The Gorm was a gigantic head. That's all it was — a head as big as a three-story building, resting on its curled tentacles like a monstrous egg on a nest. As I was lifted into the air, I saw the long sac of its stomach trailing out behind it, disappearing around a curve in the tunnel. Through the semi-transparent membrane I could see half-decomposed bodies of the Briss awash in slime. Then I was lifted high, and I saw where the light came from. The creature's eye was a green phosphorescent egg floating in a dome filled with transparent fluid. I felt the weight of the Gorm's mind, an alien intelligence so towering that it was like staring up at a mountain. But it was a mind controlled by greed, warped by an insatiable appetite — an intelligence which was insane by an definition of madness. The blood spurted from my stump, spattering the stained teeth. I felt myself falling, and I wished that I could go mad, or at least find the oblivion of unconsciousness....

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I was about to be eaten alive.

It was a short drop. I was caught by the converging walls of pink and ... How can I describe being swallowed? Rippling pressure forced me back into the hot, muscled throat. Saliva choked off my breath and my senses departed—

— Floating in a bitter green acid. It ate into my boots and dissolved my clothing. I could feel the digestive fluid burning my flesh. I stood up and felt the thick hot folds of the creature's stomach lying on my back. With my single hand I clawed at the membrane, fighting for breath and with each breath taking in more of the gas which seared my lungs.

I sensed a distant flash of fire, then darkness....

I gasped, choked, and sucked in great mouthfuls of fresh air. When it seemed I would live again, I opened my eyes to see the commander bending over me, tying a tourniquet around the stump of my arm. Behind him stood the geology officer and some members of the defense platoon. All were dappled with green gunk. I was too dazed to speak. Life had been snatched from me and then given back, and the gift was too precious to play with. As the commander plunged a syrette into my arm, he gave a flinty-soft smile and said:

"This is what we call getting blooded, Lippy."

Then came the sweet, soft numbness....

From my elastic sling in the ship's sickbay, I gazed into the viewscreen and saw the shuttles carrying the colonists down to Brisali's Planet. My ribs itched under the curative pack, but I could breathe without pain. The new arm which lay in the regenerative bath was sprouting five tiny pink fingers. I'd be back on duty by the time we reached Teglerabad, our next duty post.

Moko came in and crawled into an acceleration hammock next to mine. "They were all aboard the sentinel ship before they discovered we weren't there. Of course they couldn't leave us stranded. That's the iron law of the contact service."

"But how'd they get into the tunnel?"

"Well, they couldn't use the space cannon, because that would've lifted about three trillion tons of dirt, and us with it. So they stood the ship over the hole and cut on the escape rockets. It cracked open the tunnel. Captain Jorgen and the defense platoon dropped inside and came toward us. I jumped through the force screen, and we caught the Gorm in a crossfire. Blew his head to chunks of green goo, then cut you out of his

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stomach. You were a mess."

"I know."

"Then we went into orbit. Scanners picked out a couple thousand Gorm nests scattered around the planet. We blasted them to vapor with atomic cannon. A lot of Briss were lost, but the captain couldn't risk letting them get to their weapons. We still don't know what they had. Everything was set to self-destruct when the masters died."

In the screen I saw another shipload of colonists descend. I wondered if they would use my Briss dictionaries; I wondered if they would treat the little people as individuals with a right to their own culture. "I wonder if we're any better than the Gorm — really."

Moko shrugged and picked up his lute. "Once there was an animal on Old Earth called cows. Men took care of them, fed them, built shelters. Petted them and gave them names. Cured their diseases and destroyed their enemies. When the cows got fat, they were killed and eaten. And people saw nothing strange about any of it."

"So what does it all mean, Moko?"

"I dunno." He fingered his lute thoughtfully. "Wonder when we'll run into the Gorm again."

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AS EASY AS TWO PLUS THREE

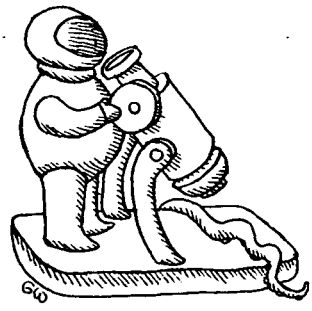
I used to refer to myself, years ago, with as much modesty as I could manage (I never could manage much) as a "minor celebrity." By that I meant that perhaps one person out of a thousand thought I was a great and famous man, and the other nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine had never heard of me.

That was the just the right proportion, too. I manage to meet that one-out-of-a-thousand much oftener than chance alone would dictate (by going to science fiction conventions, for instance), and I can then bask in his (or, preferably, her) adulation. Aside from that, I retain my privacy and anonymity through much of my life thanks to the other nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine. This means that I don't have to worry if my hair is mussed up, as it usually is. I know that no one is going to nudge his neighbor and say, "Look at that great and famous man walking around with his hair mussed up."

But now this business of being a minor celebrity is getting out of hand. I recently received in the mail a copy of the syndicated

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science



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newspaper magazine section *Family Weekly* for 30 December 1973. There, in a column entitled "What in the World!", is listed, among other things, those people who were to have birthdays in the coming week.

It turned out that Sandy Koufax was 38 and Bert Parks 59 on Sunday, December 30. Then, too, Barry Goldwater was 65, Xaviet Cugat 74, and Dana Andrews 62 on Tuesday, January 1. And then, to my mingled surprise and horror, I found listed for Wednesday, January 2, none other than your friend and mine, Isaac Asimov. Worse yet, my age was given. Still worse, it was given correctly, as xxxxx-xxxx. Inevitably, I later got a rash of fan-letters wishing me a happy xxxxx-xxxx birthday.

With things like that in the public prints, how am I going to be convincing when I tell all those beautiful young ladies at the science fiction conventions that I'm just a little past thirty —

It is a relief to turn to less serious things, then, like the energy shortage which is threatening civilization with destruction.

Suppose we make up our minds that cheap oil is gone forever and that the oil wells will be dry by the end of the century. What then?

We can switch back to coal, of which a several centuries' supply remains in the ground. Digging it up at a considerably increased rate will, however, involve a great deal of damage to the environment and will require the hiring of a great many men for the hazardous and unpopular task of wrenching the coal out of the ground. It will make necessary the shipping of coal in unprecedented quantities over a railway network we have carelessly allowed to go to ruin or else we must develop large-scale (and expensive) methods for the conversion of coal into liquid and gaseous fuel on-site. The same difficulties can be listed for the squeezing of oil out of shale.

Still, this may serve as a stopgap, while science and technology learn to make greater use of such energy sources as wind, tides, running water, geothermal heat, and sunlight.

My own feeling, however, is that the best and most versatile energy source of the future is nuclear in nature.

We have a kind of working nuclear energy source already, of course. For nearly twenty years, men have been splitting uranium nuclei ("nuclear fission") and have obtained useful energy as a result. At the present moment, a "breeder reactor," capable to producing more fission fuel than it consumes, has been put into action by the Soviet Union.

Other nations, including the United States, have breeder reactors in

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prospect, and, by such means, the Earth's entire available supply of two heavy metals, uranium and thorium, can be used as a source of energy. Fission energy by way of breeder reactors could last mankind for something like a hundred thousand years.

That sounds pretty good. It's a lot and it's here — but there's a catch. Although nuclear fission doesn't produce the kind of air pollution that coal and petroleum do, the split fragments of the heavy atoms undergoing fission are radioactive.

This radioactivity is far more dangerous than an equivalent amount of ordinary chemical polution can be, and it must not be allowed to enter the environment until the radioactivity dies away — which can take centuries. Any reliance on nuclear fission, then, will require the safe and permanent disposal of dangerously radioactive fission products which will be produced at a steadily increasing rate.

Then, too, there is always the small chance that the fission reaction may go out of control, explode, and send radioactivity broadcast over a wide region. So far, truly serious accidents have not occurred, but it is impossible to guarantee that accidents will *never* happen, so that there is a considerable resistance on the part of some parts of the population to the further expansion of fission energy.

The solution? — Fusion energy.

It is the medium-sized atomic nuclei that have the least energy. Splitting large nuclei into those nearer the medium-size (fission) is one way of getting energy. Another is to start at the other end of the list of atoms, and combine very small nuclei into those that are larger and nearer the medium-size.

The process of forcing small atomic nuclei to fuse into larger ones is "nuclear fusion." The best known example of this in nature is the process whereby the nuclei of hydrogen atoms (the smallest variety known) are made to undergo fusion in the core of stars, producing nuclei of helium atoms (the second-smallest) and also producing the vast quantities of energy which stars, including our own Sun, pour out into space in all directions.

Nuclear fusion offers an even richer supply of energy than nuclear fission does. A kilogram of hydrogen undergoing fusion to helium will produce at least four times as much energy as a kilogram of uranium undergoing fission. Furthermore, hydrogen is a much more common substance than uranium, and so the total fusion energy potentially

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available is enormously greater than the total fission energy available.

In the Universe as a whole, hydrogen is by far the most common substance. Nine-tenths of all the atoms in the Universe, astronomers estimate, are hydrogen. It is not surprising, then, that it is hydrogen fusion that powers the stars. It's the only thing that can, in fact. Nothing else is common enough to serve as fuel on so grand a scale. In our own Sun, 600,000,000 tonnes of hydrogen are undergoing fusion into helium every second! It is this which has supplied the vast energy output of the Sun through every second of its existence as a star over the past five billion years and more. What's more, the Sun is so huge and its hydrogen content so vast that there is enough to keep it going for billions of additional years.

Hydrogen fusion is much more difficult to get started than uranium fission is. For uranium nuclei, a mildly energetic neutron is enough to turn the trick. Hydrogen nuclei, in order to fuse, must slam into each other with enormous energies. This is equivalent to saying that the hydrogen must be heated to enormous temperatures. Then, too, there must be a great many hydrogen nuclei in the vicinity, so that the heated nuclei won't miss each other too often as they tear around. This is equivalent to saying that the hydrogen must also be present at enormous densities.

The two requirements, high temperature and high density, are very difficult to achieve together. As the temperature goes up, the hydrogen tends to expand so that its density tends to decrease dramatically. Long before the temperature has reached the level where we can have any hope of fusion at the original density, the hydrogen (under ordinary conditions) has spread out so thinly that there is no chance of fusion at any temperature.

This means that the hydrogen must be confined while it is being heated. The best way of confining it is by means of an enormous gravitational field. This is what happens on the Sun. The Sun's own powerful gravity compresses its innermost core to the point where the hydrogen is hundreds of times as dense there as it is on Earth, and keeps it that dense even though the temperature at the Sun's center reaches some 15,000,000° C.

There is no chance, however, that we can duplicate this sort of "gravitational confinement" on Earth. A gravitational force like the Sun's, or anything like it, simply cannot be produced in the laboratory.

Furthermore, we can't deal with hydrogen at densities such as those which exist at the Sun's core. We have to deal with hydrogen at much smaller densities and make up for this by achieving temperatures even

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higher than those that exist in the Sun's core. But then, as we try to reach such enormous temperatures, what is to keep the hydrogen from expanding at once into the thinnest, most useless wisps?

Is there any way in which we can heat the hydrogen so quickly that before the hydrogen atoms have time to expand they are already at the temperature needed for fusion? The time it takes for hydrogen to expand is greater than zero because of the principle of inertia, so the process by which hydrogen atoms are kept in place simply because they lack the time to expand is said to be "inertial confinement."

In the 1950s, the only way by which heat could be produced quickly enough to raise hydrogen to the necessary ignition temperature before it could expand, was to make use of a uranium-fission bomb. When this was done, the fission igniter started the hydrogen-fusion reaction and produced a much vaster explosion. The result is the so-called "hydrogen bomb" or "H-bomb," which is more appropriately called a "fusion bomb."

The first fusion bomb was exploded in 1952, but though that demonstrated that nuclear fusion was possible on Earth, the demonstration was that of uncontrolled fusion, and what we need to have energy in peace is *controlled* fusion.

Can we find some way to confine hydrogen while we heat it slowly — some system of confinement other than gravitational, some system we can handle in the laboratory? Or else, can we heat hydrogen very quickly to take advantage of inertial confinement by some means other than that of a fission bomb?

Gravitational confinement can be replaced by "magnetic confinement." A magnetic field is enormously stronger than a gravitational one and can be handled easily in the laboratory. One disadvantage is that whereas a gravitational field works on all matter, a magnetic one works only on electrically-charged matter, but that is easily taken care of. Long before fusion temperatures are reached, all neutral atoms are broken up into electrically-charged fragments ("plasma").

The electrically-charged particles of plasma are influenced by a magnetic field. One of the proper kind and shape will cause the particles of a plasma to move in certain directions that will keep them within the bounds of the field. The particles of the plasma will then be confined by the insubstantial shape of the field. (Naturally, no material object can confine the super-hot plasma — since the plasma will make contact with

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the confining matter, and either the plasma will cool down or the matter will vaporize.)

The difficulty with magnetic confinement is this. The magnetic fields set up to confine the plasma are unstable. After a very tiny fraction of a second, they can develop a leak, or change their shape and, in either case, break up so that the confined plasma instantly expands and is gone.

For a quarter of a century, nuclear scientists in both the United States and the Soviet Union have been trying to work out ways for producing a magnetic field of such a shape that it will stay stable long enough to allow a sample of plasma dense enough for fusion to become hot enough for fusion.

Suppose, for instance, that an electric current is made to flow through a plasma which is within a glass cylinder. The current sets up a magnetic field that fits around the plasma like a series of circles. These circles tend to produce a "pinch effect," pinching the plasma inward away from any fatal contact with the glass. Within the magnetic field, the plasma can then be heated, but if the field twists or leaks, the plasma would flow out, touch the glass, cool down at once and you would have to start over.

Naturally, we wouldn't want the plasma to leak out the ends of the cylinder. One way of preventing that is to build up particularly strong magnetic fields at either end of the cylinder, fields that would repel particles reaching them and reflect them backward. Such an arrangement is a "magnetic mirror."

Another way is to insert the plasma into a doughnut shaped cylinder so that the plasma will go round and round, and there will be no ends out of which to escape. Unfortunately, a magnetic field designed to enclose a doughnut of plasma is particularly unstable and would not last more than the tiniest fraction of a second.

To increase the stability, the doughnut-cylinder was first twisted into a figure-8. This made it possible to produce a stabler magnetic field. Such an instrument was called a "stellarator," from a Latin word for "star," since it was hoped to duplicate, within it, the fusion reactions that took place in stars.

Then it was found that a simple doughnut was preferable after all, if *two* magnetic fields were set up, the second in such a way as to stabilize the first. Soviet physicists modified the manner in which the second field was set up, and improved its efficiency in a type of device they called "Tokamak," an abbreviation of a complicated Russian phrase. After the first Soviet results in Tokamak devices were announced in 1968, American

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physicists promptly modified some of their stellarators, incorporating the Tokamak principle.

It looks as though the Tokamak may suffice to bring about fusion if we don't ask too much of it. Let's see how we can ask the least.

Although it is hydrogen that physicists are trying to fuse, there are three varieties of hydrogen atoms. One has, as its nucleus, a single proton and nothing more, so it is "hydrogen-1." Another has a nucleus of two particles, a proton and a neutron, so it is "hydrogen-2" (or "deuterium"). The third has a three-particle nucleus, one with a proton and two neutrons, so it is "hydrogen-3" (or "tritium").

All three varieties of hydrogen will fuse to helium atoms. However, hydrogen-2 will fuse more easily and at a lower temperature than hydrogen-1, while hydrogen-3 will do so still more easily and at a still lower temperature.

In that case, why not forget all about ordinary hydrogen, shift to hydrogen-3 at once and use it as our fusion fuel? Unfortunately, there's a catch.

Hydrogen-3 is not a stable substance. It is radioactive and breaks down so rapidly that hardly any of it exists on Earth. If we want to use hydrogen-3, with its 12-year half-life, we have to form it by energy-consuming nuclear reactions. We would have to form it, for instance, by bombarding the light metal lithium with neutrons from a fission reactor. It would mean using an expensive fuel, difficult to produce and difficult to handle.

What about hydrogen-2? This is a stable atom and exists on Earth in considerable quantity. To be sure, only 1 atom of hydrogen out of 7000 is hydrogen-2 (all the rest are hydrogen-1). Still, there is so much hydrogen on Earth that even 1 out of 7000 isn't bad.

For instance, every liter of water contains about ten thousand billion billion atoms of hydrogen-2, and if all of this deuterium is made to undergo fusion it will deliver as much energy as 300 liters of gasoline. Since there are nearly three thousand billion billion liters of water on Earth, it is easy to see that there would be enough fusion energy to last mankind, at the present rate of energy use, for many billions of years.

But though hydrogen-2 is easier to ignite than hydrogen-1, the ignition is not really easy. At reasonable densities, temperatures of 400,000,000° C. would be required. (This is 25 times the temperature of the Sun's interior where the even-more intractable hydrogen-1 undergoes fusion, but the density at the Sun's interior is enormous.)

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We can compromise by using a mixture of hydrogen-2 and hydrogen-3, going to the expense and difficulty of manfuacturing hydrogen-3, but in lesser amounts than if that were our only fuel.

The ignition temperature for a half-and-half mixture of hydrogen-2 and hydrogen-3 is only 45,000,000° C.. This is the lowest known ignition temperature for any fusion reaction that involves at least some stable nuclei. It looks as though 2 + 3 is as easy as we can get in fusion.

Since the helium atom, which is produced in hydrogen-fusion, has four particles in the nucleus (helium-4), the fusion of hydrogen-2 and hydrogen-3 leaves one particle over: 2 + 3 = 4 + 1. That one particle is a neutron.

As it happens, hydrogen-3 is formed by bombarding lithium with neutrons, as I said earlier. Therefore, although we might prepare hydrogen-3, to begin with, by using neutrons from fissioning uranium, once we got the 2 + 3 fusion reaction going, it itself would supply the neutrons for the formation of more hydrogen-3.

So what we need now is a 2 + 3 mixture in a Tokamak which is dense enough and hot enough to ignite.

In 1957, the British physicist, J. D. Lawson, had calculated that in order for ignition to take place once the proper temperature was reached, that temperature had to be maintained for a certain period of time. This length of time serves to make sure that enough nuclei collide in their random movements to produce enough heat to keep the reaction going. Naturally, the more dense the plasma, the more collisions will take place in a given time and the shorter the time of confinement necessary for ignition.

For hydrogen at the density found under ordinary conditions on Earth, the ignition temperature need be maintained for only four millionths of a second. Even the best magnetic devices for confining plasma can't hold hydrogen at that density for even that length of time. The density must be decreased therefore, and that means that the time during which the temperature must be maintained must be correspondingly increased.

Soviet and American physicists have pushed the combined density and temperature-time to higher and higher levels but have not yet reached ignition point. As magnetic fields continue to be strengthened and to be more subtly designed, it seems certain, though, that within a few years (how many exactly it is difficult to preduct) the fusion fire will catch.

And, ironically, after a quarter-century of work on electro-magnetic

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confinement as a substitute for gravitational confinement, it seems that a later competitor in the field will overtake the magnetic field and prove to be the answer. We are back to inertial confinement with something replacing the atomic bomb as a super-fast raiser of temperature.

In 1960, the laser was invented; a device by means of which radiant energy, such as visible light, could be delivered in large quantities, concentrated into a very fine focus. For the first time, men learned how to deliver energy with a rapidity similar to that of a fission bomb, but on a so much smaller scale that the delivery was safe. (The first lasers were feeble indeed, but in the years since their invention, they have been growing steadily more powerful and more versatile).

Suppose a laser beam is concentrated on a pinhead-sized pellet made up of a mixture of frozen hydrogen-2 and hydrogen-3. (This would be an extremely cold pellet, of course, since these substances don't freeze till a temperature of -259° C., or 14° K — only 14 degrees above absolute zero — is reached.)

Naturally, the laser beam would evaporate the pellet in an extraordinarily tiny fraction of a second. However, as the energy from the laser beam continues to pour into the evaporating gas, the plasma that results is heated to ultra-high temperatures in less time than it takes for the individual nuclei to move away. It is a case of inertial confinement, like that produced by the fission bomb, but on a small and controllable scale. Since the molecules have no time to move away, an enormous pressure is placed on the interior of the pellet which compresses to ultra-high densities and ignition can take place.

In 1968, the Soviets first used this laser-heating of solid hydrogen to the point of detecting individual fusion reactions among the nuclei, but not enough to produce actual ignition. Since then, both the United States and the Soviet Union have vastly increased the money being invested on this approach, and now something like $30 million a year is being spent by each nation.

Plans are under way to build better and more energetic lasers and to focus a number of them on the frozen pellet from different directions.

Frozen hydrogen-2 and -3 have densities about a thousand times that of the ordinary gaseous form to begin with. Compression of the central region of the pellet will increase that density an additional ten thousand times. Under such conditions it would take only a trillionth of a second after reaching the necessary temperature to set off a flood of fusion energy. If additional pellets are dropped into the chamber one after

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another, the flood could be made continuous.

Naturally, a great deal of energy must be invested in bringing about ignition. Enormous laser beams, consuming vast quantities of electricity are required; to say nothing of the energy required to isolate hydrogen-2 from ocean water and to form hydrogen-3 by neutron bombardment of lithium — and then to freeze both hydrogen-2 and hydrogen-3 to 14° K.

This energy-investment is needed only at first, however. Once the fusion reaction is ignited, it will itself produce the energy needed to keep the lasers going.

The science involved seems certain to work — and within a few years, perhaps. Then will come the engineering end of it, the actual setting up of practical devices that will take the heat of fusion and convert it into useful energy.

If we begin by producing what will certainly be only a "first-generation" fusion reactor, with a mixture of hydrogen-2 and hydrogen-3 ignited by laser action, most of the energy produced will be in the form of very energetic neutrons. These neutrons will move outward from the fusion reactor in all directions and will strike a shielding shell of liquid lithium.

The neutrons will react with the lithium to produce hydrogen-3, which can be isolated and fed back into the fusion reactor. The lithium is heated, in the process of absorbing and reacting with the neutrons, and is cooled off by circulation past water reservoirs. The water is itself heated in the process and is converted to steam, which can turn a turbine and produce electricity in the conventional manner.

The advantages are enormous.

For one thing the energy is endless, for the fuel (hydrogen-2 and lithium) exist in sufficient supply on Earth to last mankind for an indefinite period. The energy is ubiquitous, too, since the fuel exists all over the Earth.

The energy is safe since the only dangerous products are neutrons and hydrogen-3, and both are consumed if the reaction works with complete efficiency. What is left over is helium, which is completely safe. Nor is the danger, in case of accidental leakage anywhere, nearly what it would be in the case of nuclear fission.

In "second-generation" fusion reactors, the danger would even be less. Physicists speculate that the hydrogen-2/hydrogen-3 fusion reaction can serve merely as an igniter to further fusion. You would have a pellet made of boron-11 and hydrogen-1, with hydrogen-2 and hydrogen-3 at the core.

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Under laser activation, the core would ignite and create energies high enough to set up a boron-hydrogen fusion (3,000,000,000° K. would be required).

The boron, fusing with hydrogen-1 would split into three nuclei of helium-4 (11 + 1 = 4 + 4 + 4) and nothing else — no neutrons, no radioactive particles of any nature.

Finally, there can be no explosion. In nuclear fission, energy can only be produced if large quantities of uranium are present in the fissioning core. Fusion, however, works with tiny quantities of fuel. If anything at all goes wrong, it can only succeed in stopping the process at once. Fusion energy presents us with an automatic fail-safe system.

But watch out —

First, fusion produces heat that would not otherwise exist on Earth ("thermal pollution"), just as burning coal and oil do. This additional heat, over and above that which arrives from the Sun, cannot be radiated away by the Earth without a slight rise in the planet's overall temperature. If the availability of fusion energy encourages us to use it in such wild amounts as to increase energy production to perhaps a thousand times the present rate, we may succeed in melting the polar icecaps over a relatively small stretch of decades. This will drown the heavily-populated coastal areas of the continents under 200 feet of ocean water — and that will make breathing difficult.

Then, too, if the availability of fusion energy encourages mankind to harbor false illusions of security and to continue to multiply its numbers endlessly, our rather delicately balanced technological civilization will collapse for reasons other than energy shortage.

Finally, even if we ignite a fusion reaction tomorrow, the engineering problems involved in building practical large-scale power stations are enormous and I would guess it would take 30 years — by which time the world population would be (barring catastrophe) 7,000,000,000.

So we've got at least thirty years ahead of us in which we're going to have to live under energy-short, population-high conditions. Mankind must walk a thinning and rising tight-rope to reach possible safety. The odds are against us, but let's try.

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Margaret St. Clair has written many fine stories for F&SF, going back to our second issue in 1950. It's good to welcome her back with this colorful tale about a fight against an ill-planned subdivision on the California coast, a struggle whose last chance of success lay with one wild and irrational appeal . . .

The Shadow of Horns

by MARGARET ST. CLAIR

"Oh, he had the commission buffaloed," Statler said glumly. "As soon as Tanner got up to announce their decision, I knew we hadn't a chance. All that money — it paralyzed opposition.

"The funny thing is that, from what I hear, Jorgenson's real-estate empire is awfully shaky. Those two earlier subdivisions were flops. I suppose he's planning to recoup with Sea Fingers Cove. But it's my belief that if something were to happen to Jorgenson, the structure he's built up would prove to be built on sand. He's got creditors and disaffected investors everywhere. I don't think anybody else would carry on with Sea Fingers Cove. It's strictly one-man."

Rick nodded. "Other people have said that. Well, maybe he'll have a stroke. His face is red enough."

"Fat chance," Statler said, getting into his Volvo. "The good die young — Give my regards to Gerda, by the way. How is she these days?"

"Oh, fine. She says she never felt better in her life."

"That's good. Bye for now."

And that, Rick thought, was that. He crawled into the Volksie and started it. What a lot of times he'd driven over to Yokoho in the little car, trying to stop — or at least slow down — Jorgenson in his attempt on the integrity of the Mendoma coast! There'd been meetings, petitions, hearings, day after day taken off from work. And in the end Jorgenson — Jorgenson! an overweight red-faced Swede who'd seemed to be sweating liquid suet in the warmth of the Development Commission room — had got his permit to develop the

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five hundred acres of the old Gomez ranch. As it might have been expected he would.

Rick sighed. There was a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. The coast was doomed. Oh, the destruction wouldn't be immediate. He and Gerda might both be on the other side of thirty before it would be complete. But in the end, the incomparable beauty of the coast would have been sacrificied to provide "second homes" for the affluent who already had first homes in the cities. The ranchers would be driven out; they wouldn't be able to afford subdivision taxes on farmland. It would be a repetition of what had already happened in the Napa Valley. Finally, Jorgenson would put up the condominiums.

The car was climbing steadily. This part of the road was almost a highway, but when he got into the trees, he'd have to go slower. Rick told himself that at least the matter was settled. It ought to be a relief. He wouldn't have to drive over to Yokoho again.

A flicker of movement by the side of the trees caught his eye. A fawn! If he hadn't seen it move, he'd never have been able to pick it out; it blended perfectly into the pattern of light and shade.

Well, the deer would probably be able to maintain themselves long after the grand Mendoma milch cows had given place to the roofs of second homes and condominiums. He knew people who lived in the Berkeley hills and were visited by deer almost nightly. But Jorgenson had said, at one of the hearings, that he felt that coast would be "far better off" without the deer. After Sea Fingers Cove got started, there would certainly be fewer of them.

The road wound. Rick had to keep swallowing to adjust the pressure on his ear drums. The car reached the crest of the coastal ridge and began, in curve after curve, to go down. A delicious coolness succeeded to the intense heat of the interior.

Scraps and tatters of mist lay ahead. They parted suddenly, and Rick saw the noble blue of the Pacific ahead. How beautiful the coast was here, with the long beaches, the many rivers, and the cattle grazing on green fields! Beautiful unflawed, and pathetically vulnerable ....

Jorgenson had said several times that he intended to make a "high-class" subdivision. No doubt he did, though the way his other developments had turned out wasn't encouraging. But the plot size he proposed at Sea Fingers Cove was the smallest permitted by the coastal code, and the load on the land was over the maximum. He — oh, stop it, Rick told himself. He was sick of thinking about it.

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Jorgenson had his permit. There wasn't anything more to be done.

He turned the Volksie into the driveway of the little house he and Gerda were renting. The house didn't have a marine view, but if you climbed up in the little water tower, where the tank was that held their water supply, you could see two beaches and a lighthouse.

Gerda was standing beside the driveway, waiting for him. It always surprised him that a girl as big as she currently was could look so pretty and be so desirable. But no doubt his being the cause of the impressive change in her figure had something to do with the way he felt.

"We lost," she said after a moment, looking at him through the car window.

"Un-hun." He crawled out of the car and stretched, hearing his joints creak. "We sure did. Only one member of the commission voted against giving Jorgenson his permit."

Gerda sighed. "Anyhow, you won't have to drive to Yokoho any more — You know what bothers me most? It's not the beaches, though they'll be having people four deep on them after a while. It's the deer."

"Un-hun," he said. He put his arm around her, and they walked toward the house. Marigolds were blooming beside the path.

"It's funny, I guess," she said, "because I really hate the little stinkers. They eat up half the stuff we plant: do you remember how I cried when we went out that morning and found the scarlet runner beans were clean gone? But there's something so wild and free about deer! It gave me such a thrill to look out the window and see three deer browsing on a wild lilac bush."

"Yeah, I know," he said. "But I guess they'll be around quite a while yet. It'll take forty years to get rid of all the deer."

They both stayed depressed. Supper was a silent meal. They washed the dishes together. About eight o'clock Azrael knocked on their front door.

Azrael was, by his own account, a ceremonial magician. He'd only been living at Lancaster a couple of months, but he'd fitted easily into the semihippie life of the younger inhabitants. Rick had once asked him to attend a hearing in Yokoho with him, but Azrael had refused, on the grounds that the hearing was being held in the planetary hour of the angel Ithuriel, and he had to be at home so he could burn incense to him. Azrael had a heavy bushy beard, a cast in one eye, and a fondness for wearing turbans with walking shorts. Gerda said she thought he was trying to look like a Sikh.

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"I hear the commission gave Jorgenson his permit," Azrael said after greetings had been exchanged.

"Yeah, they did. Who told you the news?"

"Oh, Statler telephoned my landlady, and she told me. It's too bad I didn't know earlier what a bad lot Jorgenson is. I might have been able to help you magically."

"Um," Rick said. He accepted a glass from Gerda, who was bringing him and Azrael wine.

"...Even now, something might be done in that line," Azrael said, with a provocative lift of one eyebrow.

"I'm afraid I haven't much faith in magic," Rick said.

"You don't have to have faith," Azrael answered. "Magic is what you use when rational things fail. Meetings, petitions, hearings — they were rational ways of dealing with Jorgenson, and you had a lot of them. But they didn't do you any good, did they?"

"No," Rick confessed.

"Then it might be time to try something irrational."

There was a silence. Gerda poured more wine in Azrael's glass. She got her knitting — she was making a cap for the baby — and sat down by the lamp.

More from a wish to distract his thoughts from today's failure than from a genuine interest in Azrael, Rick said, "What kind of magic would you suggest?"

"Well, we can't do the real ceremonial bit. You're not initiates, in the first place, and the purifications are complex. But we might be able to work out something using group spirits."

"What do you mean, group spirits?" Rick asked.

"Oh — the angel of the redwoods, the group spirit of the hawks, the powers of wind and tide, the spirit of the deer. The powers of the land, in short."

"Um," Rick said again. He couldn't think of any other comment to make.

Gerda looked up from her work. "A group spirit is the soul of a — of an animal?" she asked. She pushed back her long light hair.

"It's the soul of a group of animals. Human beings have a soul, an individual soul. Animals have a group spirit," Azrael answered.

He looked at Gerda speculatively. "You're more psychic than your old man," he said, "and a pregnant woman is often considered to have extra power. Let's go outside."

They followed him into the clearing to the east of the front porch. "The moon's coming up," he said with satisfaction. "Would you like to try a little magic, Ms. Gerda?"

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"Sure," Gerda said. She giggled a little nervously.

"All right. Take off your shoes, and stockings if you're wearing any. I want your bare feet to touch the earth."

Gerda kicked off her shoes obediently. "Face the moon," Azrael went on, "and hold your arms like this." He showed her how, his face intent and serious in the colorless moonlight.

"Like this?" Gerda asked, trying hard.

"Yes, that's right. Now say, 'By the child in my womb, I call up the powers of the land against Jorgenson!' Be sure the moonlight is shining full on your face when you say it."

Gerda repeated obediently, "By the child in my womb, I call up the powers of the land against Jorgenson." She spoke in her usual voice.

A second passed. Gerda still held her arms in the attitude Azrael had taught her. Then she said, quite slowly and in a voice several notes deeper than her usual one, "I ask the hunter of the night to help me. I call up the horned god against Jorgenson."

Rick felt a quiver of nervous excitement along his neck, a profound and atavistic thrill. Where had Gerda learned to talk like that? And what a strange expression there was on her face!

Azrael was peering at her intently. He nodded, as if a surmise had been confirmed. "I told you she was more psychic than you are," he said to Rick. "Something came through then."

Gerda draw a deep breath. She rubbed her nose for a moment. Then she stood on one foot and began putting on the other shoe. "Where'd you learn about the horned god?" Azrael asked.

"...I don't know," Gerda answered in her ordinary voice. "*Did* I say something about a horned god? I don't quite remember just what I did say."

"When will the magic start working?" Rick asked. He was still in the grip of an atavistic excitement, and his normal skepticism was in abeyance.

Azrael laughed. "Not right away. It might take quite a while. And, of course, it may not work at all. As I like to say, I never guarantee magic."

"Oh." Suddenly Rick felt an intense distaste for the moonlight. "Let's go inside," he said.

His feeling of defeat persisted for the next few days. He went back to work (for Colter, a general contractor), and the money was welcome. Gerda tried to encourage him, pointing out that they had a duty to enjoy Mendoma before it was spoiled. They went on several walks, looking for late-summer

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wildflowers, when he got back from work. But he couldn't regain his usual cheerfulness.

On Saturday, the noon mail brought a letter from Rick's Aunt Peggy. Peggy was what Azrael had once disparagingly called "a rich hippie." She wore Levis, went to rock concerts, recycled all her bottles, and was thinking of studying Sanskrit. At Christmas she always sent Rick and Gerda checks. Rick liked her and thought she was a lot of fun. She lived in San Francisco.

"You asked about Max Hunter," her letter read, after the usual expressions of pleasure about Gerda's good health. "Well, he and his group, the Corncobs, have been doing some very odd things lately. I'd say they were literally 'out of this world.'

"What happens is something like this. Max comes out on the stage in utter darkness. There is *no* light anywhere. The audience has been sitting quietly, waiting. Nobody whispers or coughs. The only sound is their breathing. (The oddness begins here, being with so many silent people in absolute darkness.)

"Slowly, a very little light comes on. A man's silhouette is visible. Max — if it is Max — seems naked. But a brace of horns — antlers, really — is strapped to his head.

"He stands there while the tension builds up. Then he says, in a voice that is thoroughly inhuman (I wish I could express its quality; it's like an animal speaking), 'I am a giver of gifts.'

"The audience, who have, as I said, been perfectly quiet, answers, 'You are a giver of gifts.'

"'Max says, 'I am a bestower of treasure.' Once more the audience — really, one should call them the congregation — answers appropriately.

"The litany goes on. Max makes statement after statement about the benefits he can bestow on people, and the audience keeps answering him antiphonally. Finally he says, 'I am a lord of life and death,' and this time he doesn't wait for an answer from the crowd. He begins to dance.

"The Corncobs have been playing softly — for a rock group — during the last part of the ritual. Now they begin to make sharp, hollow clicking noises, with a hard stamping beat. Max is singing as he dances. The shadow of his antlers is enormous. His song is odd (I've used that word a lot, but what other can I use?), not really words, but it certainly isn't gibberish. One has the impression that it's a hunter's song and that Max, as he dances, is miming both the hunter and the hunter's quarry.

"The acoustics of the hall have

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changed somehow. It has a cavernous ring, as if sound were echoing from curving stone walls. Max begins to leap straight up, and the firelight flickers from his sweating body. The stage — the floor of the cave — shakes under his leaps.

"The Corncobs have melted into the crowd. An immense humming comes from them. Then there's a great thunder of hoofs; Max is gone. I feel he jumped clean off the stage, out of the auditorium, into another dimension.

"There's an exhausted silence. The fire has died down. Then that tall one, Shazz, I think his name is, begins to play a sort of one-stringed fiddle. The sound is scratchy and high-pitched, but not unpleasing to hear. Suddenly Max is back, as if he'd never left, and Shazz says, 'Giver of gifts, give us a gift.'

"Max nods; the shadow of his antlers is gigantic, as broad as condor wings. 'Ask,' he says, 'and ye shall receive.'

"'...and ye shall receive,' the crowd chants antiphonally. It is the first thing they have said in a very long time.

"Max nods. His hands are up now, and objects appear in them. I think of Christmas. The air between him and us is shot with wonderful golden sparkles. I wonder how his gifts will get to the recipients.

"'Not all gifts are equally worthy,' Max says in an ordinary voice. 'But ask, and it shall be given to you.' Nobody says anything. But he, just as if he answered something spoken, says, 'No, not you. I give three gifts tonight. To you, and to you, and to you. The gifts I give tonight are all material.'

"Whatever he was holding seems to have gone; his hands are empty. He bows, an ordinary, conventional actor's bow. The lights of the auditorium come up, dazzlingly bright after the darkness. When our eyes have grown used to it, we see that the stage is empty.

"The Corncobs begin to play something or other. People sit quiet, in a collective exhaustion. After a while, a few people dance.

"Now, what was it? 'Mass hypnosis,' or a more genuine kind of thaumaturgy? You ought to come to one of their concerts, Rick, if Gerda can spare you. (No, speaking for myself, I didn't get what I wanted.) I have the impression that you could use help. You ought to come.

"Max Hunter 'is said' to be appearing with the Corncobs at Slithy Toves next Saturday. (His concerts are never advertised these days. Even the music columns in the *Chronicle* don't mention them. The news spreads exclusively by word of mouth.) I hope you can

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come! My best wishes to Gerda. Your affectionate aunt, Peggy Myers."

Rick laid the letter down on the rickety dining table. Gerda had been reading over his shoulder. "Sounds wild," he said. "Peggy is always into something wild."

"Um," Gerda said. "—Rick, I think you ought to go."

He stared at her. "Why? To hear Max Hunter and the Corncobs? I don't want to leave you. I don't ever want to leave you, as far as that goes, but I particularly don't want to leave you now."

"Yes, but — I think it'll be OK. if you're back by Monday or Tuesday. I'm pretty sure nothing will happen until Monday night, at the earliest. But I think you ought to go. I just do."

"It isn't reasonable," Rick said, making a face.

"Maybe not. But you know what Az said, about magic being what you fall back on when reasonable things fail.

"I didn't tell you, but road-building equipment went by this morning on the way to Sea Fingers Cove. Jorgenson isn't wasting any time."

Gerda was looking at him appealingly. "We can't afford the gas," he said finally. The truth was, he was tired of trying. Jorgenson had won, and that was an end to it. The thought of taking up arms against him again was sickening.

Gerda laughed. "The Volksie doesn't take much gas," she said. "Or you could hitch, Rick. That might really be better. Those big cars make better time than our Volksie does.

"Anyhow, wouldn't you like to hear some good music? You could tell me all about it when you got back. You might even buy a record or two for us to play on the phono!"

Rick considered. Gerda wasn't usually this insistent. Perhaps she knew something he didn't; Az had said she was psychic. He did hate to leave her now, but... "OK," he said. Fifteen minutes later he was standing beside Highway One, trying to thumb a ride.

He got to the city about five. Peggy seemed delighted to see him. After a wash and brushup — it was great to have a real bathroom at his disposal — she took him to dinner at a Basque restaurant.

"What's new on the coast?" she asked over the sherry. "The last time you wrote, you had tangled with some real-estate promoter."

"Subdivider," Rick corrected. "Well...." He told her about the hearings, the meetings, the petitions, and Jorgenson's final triumph. "Gerda thought I ought to come down to see what Max Hunter is doing," he finished. "She seemed to think Max could help. But I'm

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afraid it's over. I know when I'm licked."

"Um. Well, you're never really done for till you're dead," Peggy said. She sighed. She wasn't looking very well, he thought. Her skin had a yellowish tint, and her hands kept trembling.

They got to Slithy Toves a little after nine. They were ushered into a dim, though certainly not dark, hall. They found seats at one side. The audience was quiet, but by no means as silent as Peggy had described it. Rick, on whom the sherry and a good meal had had an inspiriting effect, began to feel soberly pessimistic again.

Max Hunter came on stage in a dim blue spotlight. He was wearing what looked like mechanics' coveralls, but there was a pair of branching antlers strapped to his head. The Corncobs, also wearing coveralls, followed him. They began to play. Max sang and danced a little. It was an ordinary rock concert, a little below the average, and very much below the average for Max.

There was an intermission. But the Corncobs, when they came back, played as dully as ever, and Max seemed tired and withdrawn.

A little after twelve, Peggy said, "Let's go." People were leaving. Rick said, "Is there any chance Max will, unh, do what you said?"

"I don't think so." When they were outside in the street, she said, "I'm sorry. With Max, one never knows. But he's giving another concert tomorrow night. Stay for that, Rick, please do."

He was in a mood of dull disgust. He was glad he hadn't let himself really be hopeful. Not but what the whole thing was wildly unreasonable. He said, "Stay over? Why?"

"Because ... give it another chance, Rick! You can spend tomorrow getting caught up on city life. You said Gerda wanted you to come. Do stay!" Her eyes were earnest.

Well, Rick thought, as long as he was here... He nodded, "All right. But I've got to get back by Monday."

He slept late, wondering, when he woke up, how Gerda was. The little house they rented wasn't on the telephone. His aunt was gone, but she had left a note telling him where the croissants for his breakfast were. He thought he had heard her up several times in the night.

Catching up on city life proved to be a bore. Rick found dodging city traffic gave him heartburn, city air felt heavy and thick to his lungs. He dropped in on a poetry reading, browsed through some old dance posters, listened to a couple of new tapes. He missed Gerda constantly. He was glad when dusk began to

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fall and he could go back to his aunt's apartment.

Peggy didn't tell him where she'd been all day. She got supper — a simple meal — and they left early for the concert. It was at Snoopy's Castle this time.

Peggy was tense and expectant. Rick in a mood of dull disgust. He resolved to ask Peg to leave early if the concert was as uninspired at last night's. But as soon as their admission was paid and they began to grope their way along a twilight corridor toward an ever-deepening central darkness, something magical and electric began to be felt.

Peggy, as well as he could see her in the worsening light, was smiling. She took his hand in hers and pulled him forward gently. They passed through several sets of curtains, and at last were on the edge of what, from the acoustics, seemed a large hall.

They found places in utter darkness. The hall seemed full of people, but they were as quiet as Peg had described them in her letter. There was no coughing, no whispering, no clearing of throats, only the sound breathing.

Darkness. Darkness. It was oddly tranquil to be surrounded by so many people breathing quietly. Then, in a most slow dawning of faint light, a naked man with horns strapped to his head appeared on the stage.

Max? Was this really Max Hunter? Rick remembered him smaller and slighter. Rick was learning forward, tense and expectant, almost forgetting to breathe; Peggy's hand against his was startlingly cold. And then the man on the stage spoke.

"I am a giver of gifts," he said. Oh, that voice! Cavernous, inhuman, remote, as if an animal were speaking — and yet, with a quality of dear familiarity in it. (The dearness was something Peg hadn't mentioned in her letter.) And the audience, responding tonelessly, breathed out gently, "You are a giver of gifts."

As the litany continued, Rick felt himself caught up into a heady collective emotion. It was like what he had felt beside Az and Gerda in the moonlight. It seemed that the words that were spoken had power in themselves, and when the man on the stage finished, "I am a lord of life and death," Rick felt it was no more than the truth.

Max began to dance — great leaps alternating with a miming of a slow, careful stalking. The Corncobs were playing somewhere, but Rick hardly noticed them. His whole attention was fixed on the mystical, incredible dancer who sang a hunting song as he danced.

There came the great leap Peg had written about. The hunter was gone; he had jumped clean over the

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edge of the world. But the silence that followed, Rick felt, wasn't so much one of exhaustion as it was one of confident expectation. It had been promised. And they should receive.

Shazz — no, it wasn't Shazz, it was the Corncob called Old Jason — was playing on a flute with a thin, nasal tootling. The air began to fill with sparkles. It was as if a myriad tiny sparks, living fire, were drifting slowly down. Max was back on the stage, his arms crossed over his breast. Rick could feel the blood thudding in his own ears.

Was there really going to be something like a miracle? The audience, silent so long in its greedy intentness, gave its antiphonal response; "...and ye shall receive." And Max, the shadow of his horns stretching across the stage, said in his ordinary actor's voice, "Tonight I give five gifts."

Peggy put her lips against Rick's ear. "Think what you want," she whispered sharply. "Think!"

Rick had trouble understanding what she meant. As his mind now was, it seemed he had no wants that were not being met — that the idea of needing or wanting anything was alien to him. But Peggy's voice had been imperative. He caught after thought. What was it — what did he — the one wish — Oh. Now he knew.

He thought, I want the Mendoma coast to be protected by its own powers.

The man on the stage had raised his hands above his head. There was an effect of abundance and generosity in the gesture; Peggy had been right to speak of Christmas. When he lowered his arms, there were things (it was hard to see exactly what) in both his hands.

"I have this for *you*," he said, looking directly at Rick. He tossed something over the edge of the stage and into the outstretched hands of a girl who was standing on tiptoe to catch it. It went up from hand to hand until it reached Rick.

It was a small bottle with a typewritten label. The light was too poor for Rick to be sure what the label said.

"For the woman beside you," the man with the horns went on, "the gift I give is not material...."

That must be Peggy. Rick looked at her. Her eyes were closed, and her lips curved in a soft smile. Her breathing was slow and deep.

Three other gifts were given. Each seemed to sink into the audience with a gentle shock. Then Max bowed, an ordinary, conventional actor's bow. The lights of the hall came on. Max was gone.

"Let's get out of here," Rick said to his aunt. His mood had ebbed abruptly, but the sense of having been part of an ecstatic

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communion remained. "I don't want to dance, do you?" he went on. "And I'd like to try to get back to Gerda before morning."

"Eh?" Peggy rubbed her hands over her face. "Oh, of course. ...Did you get what you wanted, Rick?"

"I don't know," he answered. "I don't want to look for fear that I didn't."

Peggy laughed. She drove him across the bridge and waited with him until he got a ride going north. They didn't talk much. But he thought she looked years younger than she had.

Considering the lateness of the hour, Rick had excellent luck with his rides. He was back in Lancaster by the time the sun was well up.

Gerda was still in bed, mountainous under the covers, but very pretty in her rosy sleepiness. "I knew you'd be here today," she said, "but I've missed you. Did you get what you went for, honey?"

"I don't know. I doubt it. I don't see how I could have."

She yawned and stretched. "But you did get something? Max really gave something to you?"

"Oh, yes. The first concert wasn't any good, but the second was just the way Peg described it. Max, or whoever it was, gave me a bottle. I haven't looked at it yet. I thought you and I could be disappointed together."

Gerda laughed. She punched up the bed pillows and leaned back on them. "I'll bet that when you were a little boy you didn't open your presents until the day *after* Christmas," she said. "Let's see the bottle, Rick. You'll have to find out sooner or later."

He sat down on the bed, got the bottle out of his coat pocket, and handed it to her. They examined it together. "Deer Attractant," Gerda read wonderingly. "Why, I don't see how that would help us We certainly don't need any more deer."

"Well, I suppose if enough of them invaded the Sea Fingers acreage, they might be able to slow down Jorgenson's bulldozing. But he'd probably just shove them off his land with the dozers."

"Um. Did I tell you I heard he's planning to put astraturf around the condominiums? Let's see what the stuff in the bottle smells like."

She unscrewed the cap on the bottle and sniffed at the contents. "No smell at all," she said. She tipped the neck of the bottle against her forefinger and delicately touched her tongue to it. "No taste, either," she reported. "It seems like a bottle full of water to me."

Rick copied her actions. "Yes, it's water," he said sourly. "All that thumbing for a bottle full of water!

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"Maybe a deer could smell it when we can't." Gerda said soothingly. "I'll get us some breakfast, and you sprinkle a little of the stuff on that big ceanothus bush. If it draws a lot of deer, we can see them from the house."

She got out of bed ponderously, and Rick went outside with the bottle. Maybe Gerda was right. It was worth trying, anyhow.

He sprinkled the wild lilac bush sparingly. After he and Gerda had eaten, he went in search of Colter. He was tired, but he couldn't afford to waste another working day. He and his old lady needed money now.

Colter very decently gave him easy jobs all day. When he got back to the house about five, the first thing he said to Gerda was, "Did any deer come?"

She shook her head. "None that I saw. Maybe after it gets a little dark. Something nice happened, though. Guisti brought us a lot of lovely surf fish, and we're having them fried for supper."

The fish were delicious. Rick got up from the table several times during the meal to see if any deer were visiting the bush he had sprinkled. None ever was. About ten o'clock the moon came up, but the better light only confirmed Rick in his belief that Max Hunter had fobbed him off with a bottle of water.

"I might as well throw the bottle away," he said to Gerda, who was lying on the bed. "'A giver of gifts' — what a bunch of lies! I feel ashamed of myself for having been deceived by it." He looked at Max Hunter's gift scornfully.

"I guess so," Gerda said vaguely. Her face wore an abstracted and remote expression, as if she were listening to a sound a long way off. "Don't throw the bottle away, though — Listen, I'm almost sure it's going to be tonight."

"Shall I go call the doctor?" he asked, instantly alert.

"No, I don't think so. Let's go to bed and get what sleep we can. I'm in for some real hard work in a few hours."

They went to bed. He embraced Gerda cautiously, and they drifted off to sleep with her head on his shoulder. Her elbow in his ribs woke him a little after three o'clock.

He drove into Lancaster to telephone the doctor. When he got back, Gerda had heated water and was giving herself an intensive bath, stopping every now and then to bend over a chair when the contractions came.

"How are you?" he asked nervously from the door. "Are you, unh, in much pain?" He and Gerda had attended a course for prospective parents together, but

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now that the time had come, everything he had learned had deserted him.

She grinned. "I upchucked while you were gone. I feel fine now. Yes, it sort of hurts, but it's OK. I mean, this is the way it's supposed to feel."

The baby, a six-pound girl, was born just at sunrise. The doctor, having slapped Rick on the shoulder and congratulated him, drove off. And Rick, seeing that Gerda and the baby both wanted to sleep, wandered out into the misty morning. The bottle marked "Deer Attractant" was still in his pocket, where he fingered it absently.

He felt great. He felt wonderful. Oh, wow! He was a good father! He wouldn't have believed it could make him feel so good.

What should they call her? Gerda had thought Peggy, after his aunt who had been so kind to them, but he'd always favored Gerda, in case of its being a girl. But maybe something entirely different would be better. How about Emily? Dorothy? Caroline? What about something fancy, like Jenifer? No, that was a little too fancy. He didn't like a really flossy name for a girl.

What would it be wise to have her major in when she went to college? Gerda thought she'd got more benefit from the ecology courses she'd taken than any of her other studies; Rick had particularly like palaeology and geology. But by the time the baby was going to school, there might be entirely new fields opening. He —

A truck rumbled by, towing a rig with a vat of melting asphalt behind it. It turned in at the main entrance to Sea Fingers Cove.

Rick stared after it, stricken with a vast incredulity. How could it be that on this morning, this morning of all mornings; when he and Gerda had become parents, that Jorgenson was carrying on with his sacrilegious assault on the Mendoma coast? He felt there must be some mistake.

On impulse he turned in at the newly bulldozed road into Sea Fingers Cove. He wanted to see just how much damage Jorgenson's men had already done.

A wide, winding swath had been dragged up the hillside, the beginning of a road. Uprooted ceanothus, baccharis and blackberries lay in broad drifts on either side. He and Gerda had wandered over Jorgenson's acreage last spring, admiring the violets, the irises, the fritillarias, the California poppies. They wouldn't do it next year. But the California poppies would go on blooming on these acres for a lot of springs.

He was still assessing the work of the dozers when Jorgenson loomed up through the fog, overweight and irascible, and

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blatant in red-and black-checked trousers that gave him a beam as broad as the moon. Rick had seen and loathed those impossible pants at many a hearing; and again he felt the shock of incredulity that, on a morning like this, Jorgenson should be walking about in them.

"You're trespassing, Mr. Donovan," Jorgenson said as soon as he caught sight of him. In the course of the hearings, he had become quite as familiar with Rick's appearance as Rick had with his. "What do you want? What are you doing on my property?" He had a voice like a foghorn with gravel in it.

"...Just looking," the other said placatingly. He didn't want to get into a quarrel with anybody, even Jorgenson, on his new daughter's birthday.

"Looking at what?" He grabbed the lapels of the other's jacket with one hand and began feeling his pockets with the other. Rick could have got loose easily enough — he was a little smaller than Jorgenson, but considerably younger and more agile — but he didn't want to risk tearing his only coat. He let the subdivider frisk him, trying to look dignified and unconcerned. He found Jorgenson, up close, even more offensive than he had been at the hearings. He smelled bad, in spite of mouthwash and deodorant.

Jorgenson's hand encountered the bulge of the bottle the younger man had brought back from San Francisco. "What's this?" he said in his foghorn bellow. "A gun?"

"Get your hands off me," Rick said, finding his tongue. "That's my property."

"Shut up." Jorgenson pulled the bottle from the pocket and looked at it. "Deer Attractant," he read wonderingly. He looked at Rick. "Deer attractant! So on top of all the other trouble you've caused me, Donovan, you're trying to steal my deer!"

"They're not your deer," the younger man told him. "They belong to the state of California. I'm not trying to steal them, anyhow. There's nothing in that bottle but tap water. Give it back to me."

"Water?" Jorgenson opened the bottle and sniffed at the contents. "My God," he said, his red face wrinkling up with disgust, "what a stink!"

He popped the bottle into the pocket of his red corduroy coat. "I'll just keep this," he said, "to make sure you don't try any monkey business. And now get the hell off my property. Or I'll call the sheriff and have him throw you out."

Rick might have resisted — the bottle of deer attractant, though worthless, did actually belong to

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him — but a flicker of movement to his right caught his eye. A deer, its nose sticking out through the curtain of mist so that it looked like a head mounted on a hunter's wall, was looking at him with large, bright, intelligent eyes.

"Keep the bottle if you want to," Rick said with a shrug.

"Thanks," Jorgenson answered grimly. "I intend to. And now, get out."

The other moved slowly off. He wasn't feeling as defeated as he might have. He trudged off through the mist toward Gerda and the baby with a small illogical flame of optimism in his heart.

Jorgenson's death attracted quite a lot of attention. The Fort Scott and Yokoho papers put it on their front page, and even the San Francisco *Chronicle* had an item about it.

The inquest was held at Sandy Port on Thursday. Quite a lot of people attended. Rick and Gerda sat in the back of the room with the baby. He was a little apprehensive he might be called as a witness, though he'd last seen Jorgenson in the early morning and the subdivider's death, according to the newspapers, hadn't occurred until dusk of that same day. Still, they had had angry words.

The first witness called was one of the men who'd been working at asphalting the road into Sea Fingers Cove. He testified that just at dusk, when he'd been getting out of his coveralls, he'd heard a cry for help in Jorgenson's voice coming out of the fog. He'd run toward it. There had been a real loud noise, a regular drumming, of deer hoofs. Thirty or forty deer had galloped past him. It had been a regular herd of them.

The coroner asked whether the deer had been bigger than usual. "No," the witness said. "They were just the usual coastal deer, not much bigger than a big dog. But I never saw such a bunch of them."

"What happened after that?"

"I ran up to Mr. Jorgenson. He was lying on the ground with his head all mashed up, but I knew it was him because of the pants he was wearing. There wasn't any use trying to move him. I was sure he was dead."

"What did you think had happened?" asked the coroner.

"There were red hoof marks on his shirt and on his forehead," the witness said. "I thought the deer must have knocked him over and trampled him. I had to light matches to see even that much. Then I yelled to Bill to call the sheriff."

The doctor who had examined Jorgenson's body was called next. Jorgenson had received three penetrating stabs in the lower

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abdomen, probably from deer antlers. His face and chest had been extensively trampled. The immediate cause of death had been hemorrhaging from the stab wounds, but the head injuries would have killed him sooner or later anyhow.

could have inflicted the deceased's injuries?" the coroner asked.

"I don't know what else could have caused them," the doctor answered. "There were hoof marks all over him. But it's not the way deer usually act."

A ranger from the station testified that he'd never known wild deer to attack a human being before. "Deer that people have made pets out of sometimes go crazy and launch out with hoofs and antlers. That's why we warn people against trying to domesticate them. But wild deer run away. This is a very unusual thing."

"There aren't any more witnesses," the coroner said, "but in view of the way in which deceased met his death, the fact that there was a bottle in his coat pocket marked 'Deer Attractant' seemed of some possible significance."

Rick stiffened. Gerda laid her hand on his arm.

"The bottle was a little less than half full," said the coroner. "We sent the bottle and contents to Yokoho for analysis. The report is that there was nothing in the bottle but tap water, and no traces of its ever having contained anything besides tap water."

One of the members of the coroner's jury raised his hand. "Mr. Stevens, was the way deceased died what they call an act of God?"

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"Well," said the coroner expansively, "the definition of an act of God that I learned in law school went something like this." He cleared his throat.

"'An inevitable accident; such an interruption of the usual course of events that no experience, foresight, or care which might reasonably have been expected could have foreseen or guarded against it.' It's for you members of the jury to decide whether or not Mr. Jorgenson's death conforms to that definition."

The verdict of the jury was that Jorgenson had met his death by being gored and trampled by a herd of deer.

The mist still hadn't cleared away when Gerda and Rick left the courthouse. He switched on the headlights of the car. Three or four miles from Sandy Port, a deer ran out on the highway in front of them. It trotted along in front of the car for a few yards, its shadow magnified on the mist by the headlights. Then it swerved off to the right and galloped up the slope.

About halfway to Lancaster the mist cleared away, and the sun came out. It was a beautiful day. Gerda, who hadn't said anything since they left the courthouse, cleared her throat.

"There wasn't anything in the bottle but tap water," she said. "Maybe Jorgenson didn't die by an act of God according to Mr. Stevens' definition. But I think he did die as the result ... of an act of ... of *some* god."

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If you were with us in 1968, you'll remember Harvey Jacobs' "The Egg of the Glak," (March) and "The Wide World of Sports," (October), and we mean that quite literally, you *will* remember those stories. Mr. Jacobs is now working on a novel, with a few shorts in-between, and we were lucky enough to grab this one.

Dress Rehearsal

by HARVEY JACOBS

Sam Derby felt old, even up there where time was an ice cube. He tried a knee bend and gave it up when his knees cracked like dice. Xarix appeared on the wall screen just as Sam Derby recovered his posture and let out a grunt.

"Are you stable?" Xarix said.

"I'm fine," Sam said. "How are you."

"It's time for the dress rehearsal," Xarix said. "Will you transport to the Green Theater?"

"You mean the Blue Theater, don't you?"

"The Green Theater. The children are performing in the Blue Theater."

"Ah, the kiddies, yes."

Some kiddies, Sam Derby thought to himself. He once knew a man named Louie who carried pictures of two apes in his wallet. When somebody asked him about his family, he showed the pictures of the young apes and beamed when the somebody told him what a lovely family he had. Up there the apes would look like gods. What they called kiddies wouldn't serve for bait back home. Sam Derby often wondered about the kind of sex that produced such results. *Yuch.* Still, they loved their offspring. Chip off the old block, like that. To each his own.

The capsule came to Sam Derby's door. He got in and pressed the circular button marked The Green Theater. The capsule hummed and moved. It was a nice feeling to be inside, warm, vibrated, moving, and no meter ticking off a dime every few seconds to remind you of time and your own heartbeat.

Sam Derby, a senior citizen, with a First Indulgence classification, had the right to be gently lifted from the capsule and aimed at the door of the Green Theater. Xarix waited for him. As the doors

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of the Green Theater slid apart, Xarix appeared like a developing photograph.

"So, Professor," Xarix said, "how do you feel about the approach of Minus Hour."

"Not Minus Hour," Sam Derby said. "Zero Hour. You're the one who should set an example."

"God, yes," Xarix said. "If one of my students said that, I would have him boiled in...oil?"

"Oil is correct," Sam Derby said. "Where is everybody?"

"Supply," Xarix said. "They'll be here at the drop of a hat."

"Good. Well said," Sam Derby said.

"Thank you. I like that expression, at the drop of a hat. I have this vision of hats dropping. It amuses me."

"You have a nice sense of humor."

"I think so. Yes. I could have been a schpritzer."

"Not exactly a hundred percent," Sam Derby said. "A man who gives a schpritz is a comic. A comic is a schpritzer. Say, 'I could have been a comic.' Its a lot better."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

Xarix and Sam Derby went to the podium at the front of the Green Theater.

"What do you want from me today?" Sam Derby said. "I can't tell them much more."

"I thought a kind of pep talk was in order. Good luck, go get 'em, half time in the locker room. Do it for the old Prof. You know what I'm after."

"I'll do that. When does the next class start?"

"Not for a week. You have yourself a vacation, a well-deserved holiday, Sam."

"Sam? What happened to Professor?"

"Under the circumstances I felt justified in using the familiar. We've worked together twelve solstices."

"Use what you want," Sam Derby said. "I wasn't complaining. In fact, I'm flattered. I was just surprised. I began to feel disposable."

"Disposable?"

"Like a tissue. I finished my work. The class is graduating, in a manner of speaking. How do I know there's another class? How do I know you won't dispose of me?"

"But that's ridiculous. You're one of us."

"Its nice of you to say so."

"Tell me," Xarix said, "are you sorry you came?"

"No," Sam Derby said. "I must admit, when you first came to get me, I wasn't so happy."

"You had a clear choice."

"Choice? You said I had a choice. But when one of us sees one

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of you for the first time coming from noplace, not the most beautiful thing in the universe, no insult intended, choice isn't choice. I was scared out of my rectum."

"Surprise is our schtik. The startle effect."

"You startled. Now that I'm here, now that I've had time to think things over, I'm really glad I flew up here. I like it here."

"Good."

"Besides, what did I have down there? Did I have respect? Honors? Medals? I had Social Security. I had a pension from the guild. The people who saw my work were dropping like flies. One day before you came I went to three funerals one after the other, bang, bang, bang."

"Alevai, Rest in peace."

"Wait. No alevai. Alevai is *it should happen.*"

"Whoops."

"Whoops. If one of them said whoops, you would give him such a knock with the ray his kishkas would burn."

"There's an advantage to executive status," Xarix said. "Sam, do you think they'll be successful?"

"Why not? You send one here, one there, they have papers, they have skills, and they know how to behave. Its amazing how they look, exactly like people. Who should find out what they're up to? You got no problem with the spies. Your problem might be that Earth is already taken over by meshuganas. Maybe from another planet. I never met a producer, an agent, a successful man who couldn't be from Mars."

"Why Mars?"

"A figure of speech."

"Ah."

"I keep asking myself, Xarix, why you want Earth?"

"Because it's there."

"So all this trouble, spies, saboteurs, chazzerai, because it's there?"

"Sufficient reason."

"Sufficient reason. Be gazoont."

"Amen."

"You could say that. In all my years on stage I never would believe such a plot. Never. Too fantastic. So who knew?"

"We knew. Our computers knew. When we asked them the name of the man for the job, Sam, your card came out with two others. Stanislavski and Lee Strasberg. One was dead, and the other is too much with the guttural noises, the schlepping and yutzing. Out of all the actors past or present, your card came out, Sam Derby."

"Its nice to know. Nobody on Earth even remembers there was a theater on Second Avenue."

"Let me say that for an alien you've dedicated yourself wonderfully well to our purposes. We had

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the human forms down pat. We had the technicalities worked out. But nuances of manner, subtleties of speech, are all important. Only you could impart such wisdom."

"Wisdom. There is a word. Xarix, I'll tell you, don't worry yourself. Your people, whatever you call it, will blend like a snowflake on white bread. Down there, anybody will swear they're just like everybody else. They have the tools."

"Thanks to you, Sam. Professor."

"So."

When the students came, there was much excitement. Take off was only hours away. The combination of youth, travel and purpose produced a familiar tension. Sam Derby stood on the podium delivering his pep talk and feeling some of the excitement himself.

"Remember, you're going to take over a planet, not to play pinochle. Do what I told you, be discreet, and the magic word is to blend in the soup. Now, let me hear all together in unison, what you say when you meet a person of rank and power."

"Oy vay, vots new, hello, howdy doo?"

"Good. Now, in sexual encounter, what is the correct approach?"

"Hey, dollink, let's schtup, don't futz, hurry up."

"Wonderful. And for you in the diplomatic corps, very important, when you run into a prince, a king, a president, let's hear it."

"Honorable Ganef, it's a real Watergate to make the acquaintance of so illustrious a nebbish schlemiel nudnik putz as thyself. May you fornicate with a horse before the night falls."

"Gorgeous," Sam Derby said. "I'm proud of you. Go, and give my regards to Broadway."

"You think they're ready?" Xarix said.

"Ready for Freddy," Sam Derby said. "If they learned my lessons and wave the arms you gave them, they'll be accepted anyplace. Like brothers."

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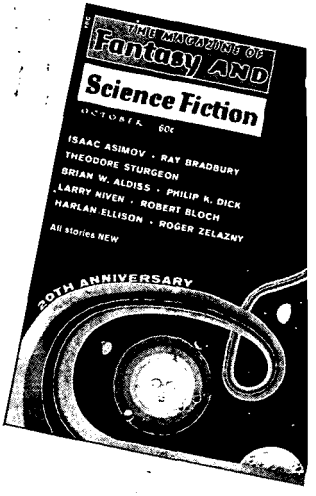
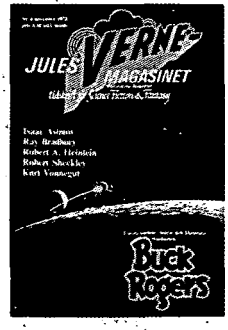


F&SF's readers are both young (84% under 45) and educated (62% have attended college). When they want relaxation or stimulation in reading, they turn to the best works of imagination and to FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION. "F&SF regularly supplies the finest the field has to offer in the way of short fiction"—*Clifton Fadiman*. Compelling fiction, along with informative and stimulating features on *Books* (James Blish) and *Science* (Isaac Asimov), have earned F&SF its reputation as tops in the field.



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